

Smoke on the Water by Tea_For_One_Please

Series: [Smoke on the Water \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Boys In Love, Boys Kissing, Dancing, Denial of Feelings, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Emotionally Repressed, Family Fluff, Feelings Realization, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, Fluff and Humor, Getting Back Together, Happy Ending, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Love Confessions, M/M, Minor Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Minor Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Minor Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Mutual Pining, New Year's Eve, Past Relationship(s), Requited Love, Season 3 Didn't Happen, Sibling Bonding, Slow Dancing, Smoking, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Weddings

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Relationships: Jonathan Byers & Will Byers, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler, Minor or Background Relationship(s), Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

In January, Will and Mike realised that their relationship wasn't working. Since then, Will's spent most of his time at college, hiding from his friends and the consequences of that decision. Closeted to his family, Mike's still pretending there's nothing wrong, having lost contact with the person he used to tell everything to.

Now, nearly a year on, they've come back to Hawkins for the holidays. In such a small town, there's nowhere left to run, and they can't avoid each other anymore.

1. The Window

Author's Note:

This is, astonishingly, the first non-AU I've written for this pairing in nearly two years. It's almost like Season 3 put me off writing in the established universe. Interesting.

ANYWAY, I hope you like this. There's less of a structured plan than goes into my usual works (it's more of an end point and a vague direction of how to get there), but we'll see where this goes.

The ancient alarm clock on Will's nightstand chirps almost imperceptibly, helpfully reminding him that the first hour of the day has already passed. He sighs and turns over to the cool patch on the other side of the pillow, squinting at the hazy red letters until the final '0' flickers to a '1'. Rolling onto his back, he stares up at the sloped ceiling, trying to think of a time when he's been less pleased to be home. He's been back in Hawkins for all of two days, and he's already craving the independence college has granted him for the last fifteen months.

It's not the only thing he's craving, though, and Will bites the inside of his cheeks, trying not to think about the little oblong box stashed in the chest of drawers on the other side of the room, listing the reasons he should absolutely not go and retrieve it: it's not healthy, it's expensive, El *always* knows...

Eventually, though, it occurs to him that there's a counter-argument which supersedes everything he's thought of, which is that he really, really wants to. Convinced by this persuasive logic, he flicks the duvet back and tiptoes from his bed to his dresser, feeling his way through the darkened room. He dares not turn on the lamp by his bed, because a faint yellow glow is still visible from the stairwell, which means El hasn't gone to bed yet.

Will freely admits that he finds it more than a little weird that his mother is shacking up with the chief of police; even more so that she

and Hopper have been living here for well over a year without any signs of regret or dissatisfaction. On the contrary, they still seem almost deliriously happy, and it's infuriating. Of course, he'd never tell Joyce or Hopper this. When she first broached the prospect of them moving in together, Will made a point of not seeming especially bothered, stating that he was off to college in September and that it wouldn't affect him that much. He failed to consider, though, that he would thus spend the rest of time fighting El for the guest bedroom.

Now, his head collides gently with a low-hanging beam and he bites his lip to stifle the curse that almost escapes. See, *this* is why he hates sleeping in the attic. Rubbing the sore spot on his crown, he slides the lowest drawer of the dresser open with catlike stealth and roots through his socks for his quarry. He fumbles around for a moment, growing increasingly irritated, but finally, his hand closes on a blocky cardboard object, and he breathes a sigh of relief. He left these in here last time he visited, and he was vaguely concerned that his mother might have found them. Thankfully, though, Joyce's rediscovered domesticity hasn't stretched to overly-thorough cleaning.

Will hops up to the room's only window and curls up in its frame, set into a little dormer in the roof. He slides one of his cigarettes out of the packet and groans inwardly – he's left his lighter in the pocket of his jacket. Leaving the packet on the sill, he pads across the room to the closet, dodging around the open dresser drawer, and pausing on the way back as a floorboard creaks beneath his foot. He mentally maps out the floor below, and relaxes – he's above his mom and Hopper's room, and they were asleep at least an hour ago.

Returning to the window, Will throws it open, bracing himself against the chill of the wind which whistles in. The thin t-shirt he wears to bed offers absolutely no insulation against the December night, and a shiver runs down his spine. Once again, he folds himself into the window bay and slips the cigarette between his lips. Five years ago, this level of exposure to the cold would have thrown him into a severe panic attack at best, and a terrifying hallucination at worst. Now, though, all he sees is his socked feet pressed against the opposite wall, and the spark of the lighter as he thumbs at the ignition.

At last, it flames into life, and he lights up, relishing the feel of the cigarette between his lips before taking the first drag. He holds his breath, closing his eyes and leaning back against the wall. He savours the smell wafting around his head, before turning his head and blowing the smoke through the open window, where the breeze picks it up and swirls it into the clear, jet-black sky.

Normally, Will's reflexes are excellent, so maybe it's the nicotine, but he doesn't hear the footsteps on the attic stairs until it's too late, and El marches in and appraises him from across the room. Concluding that it's already too late, he doesn't bother putting it out.

"I *knew* it," she says, quiet but triumphant. "You said you'd stopped." In the years since joining society, her vocabulary and speech patterns have improved beyond recognition, but Will's observed she has a tendency to resort to simple, single-clause statements when she's overwhelmed or, in this case, angry.

"And you told Mom you'd be in bed before midnight. We're both full of shit." He feels the packet tug sharply in his hand, and he tightens his grip. "Would you lay off?" he hisses. "I *have* stopped – this is my first one in months, I swear. I just keep them for emergencies. And *you* have to put a dollar in the power jar."

She snorts, but doesn't contradict him, instead opting to cross the room towards him. "*Fuck!*" Will snaps his head around, and she's hopping up and down, rubbing her ankle – she must have walked into the dresser drawer he left open. Whoops. She doesn't often curse, but he knows Hopper's never quite forgiven Dustin for teaching her that particular word.

He doesn't bother to ask if she's okay, since she's clearly not so injured she can't limp to the easy chair in the corner of the room. "How did you know, anyway? Were you spying on me?"

"Of course not," she says hotly. "I felt a draught as I was going to bed."

He hums an affirmative. "Fair enough."

They're silent for a moment. "I saw Mike in town today," El says

eventually, and he closes his eyes and sighs out a mouthful of smoke. So *that's* why she's been weird this evening. Well, more than usual.

"That must have been nice."

"It was," she says, her voice clipped. "You should – "

"Don't start."

"But he – "

"El!" he says, louder than he intended, and they both go quiet.

"He misses you," she says after a moment, quickly enough that he can't cut her off.

"Oh my god." He could almost laugh at the absurdity of his life. Here he is, smoking at an open window on the coldest night of the year, having a compulsory heart-to-heart with his ex's ex, who is also sort of his sister, and who just tried to telekinetically steal his cigarettes. What a fucking joke.

"He does," she insists, gripping the arms of the chair.

"And he said that, did he?"

"I could just tell."

He nods in acknowledgement. "We can add telepathy to your extensive list of supernatural abilities, then."

"Whatever," she says with a scowl, standing up and kicking the drawer shut as she walks past it. "Sit here alone then. See if I care."

Her footsteps fade gradually away, and the hallway light flicks off a minute later. Will lets out a sigh of exasperation, and flicks the butt of the spent cigarette out of the window, watching it bounce down the tiles into the gutter, feeling only a little ashamed of himself.

When El first started hanging out with the group after her stint of

confinement, there was unspoken tension between them. This, Will thinks, is because they were both aware that they had witnessed each other at their most vulnerable before they were even properly introduced, and they both felt unease at the other's presence.

Even so, they got over it fairly quickly, and soon established a strong fraternal bond. Bickering was commonplace between them (especially when they started living together), but for the most part they got along very well, and they very rarely lost their temper with each other, as Will just did, and his chest twinges slightly with guilt.

By now, he's almost numb with cold, but frankly he's too numb inside to care. Nevertheless, he drops down from the windowsill and closes it behind him. *You'd think*, Will reflects bitterly as he pulls his duvet up around his ears, *it's been long enough that I'd be okay with hearing El mention his name. Clearly not.*

Of course, there hasn't been a day in the last year when Mike's name hasn't crossed his mind at least once. In fact, this is probably true of the last fifteen years, too, but the difference was that it never used to hurt.

It would have been better, in Will's opinion, if there had been an inciting incident. Some big fight, or a mistake one of them had made, which led to them calling it off after nearly two years. But there just *wasn't*, or if there was, Will seriously overlooked it. Instead, he just has to accept the fact that the most important relationship of his entire life ended during a random phone call on a Tuesday night, with Mike tentatively asking, "Are we okay?"

Worse still, Will has to live with the knowledge that he answered, "No."

He doesn't regret it. He *doesn't*. Because they *weren't* okay. Phone conversations were stilted, visits had become fewer and further apart, planning things to do during them felt like a chore, and hiding their relationship from the world had become exhausting. Neither of them was happy, and they both knew it.

Will knows he's partly to blame; logically, it has to be. Since it wasn't either one of them, it has to have been both of them. He could have

put more effort into maintaining their relationship from a distance. He's also very aware that he was becoming aware of the dysfunctional nature of their relationship long before Mike brought it up, and that his own insecurities contributed to his inaction, not wanting to come across as needy, or be the first one to admit that they were having problems.

He also regrets that they haven't spoken since. For that reason, he's also *really* not pleased to be home. He spent most of the summer in Kentucky, ostensibly working, but there's no way he'll be able to get out of seeing the Party over Christmas, especially with El apparently determined to be involved.

When he stops to think about it, it becomes clear to him that the source of their problems stemmed from a lack of communication. He doesn't like to dwell on this truth, because it breaks his heart: Mike is probably the only person in the entire world with whom Will has never had trouble communicating honestly, but it was this which broke them apart.

The sensation of the nicotine relaxing his body is immediate, and almost tangible. Will knows he'll regret it in the morning, when he'll inevitably want another one, but his eyelids are finally starting to droop, and he decides he doesn't care. Besides, he can always count on El to sneak in and hide them again before he wakes up.

As he pours frosted flakes into a bowl, Mike observes wryly that his family's routine has not adapted in the slightest since he moved out. At weekends, breakfast begins at precisely seven-thirty. There is always more food than anyone actually needs, or even eats. The news mumbles from the radio in the kitchen (Mike's ears perk up at the mention of the first live website at CERN, but the newsreader quickly moves on, to his disappointment). Neither he nor Nancy are inclined to talk much this early in the morning, so conversation is stimulated entirely by Holly, who talks to each of her parents in turn, failing to notice that they aren't talking to each other.

In other words, everything is exactly as normal. He catches Nancy's eye and smirks, and she quirks an eyebrow in acknowledgement, confirming that she's made the same observation. Not for the first

time, Mike wonders if his is one of those families he's heard about, whose parents stay together until all their kids are at college, then separate – quietly, to avoid embarrassment. Truthfully, he can't really see it going any other way: without Holly, he can't imagine that his parents will be willing to sit in silence for the next twenty years of their lives.

It's why he's almost glad he and Will called it off when they did. As the most important person in Mike's life, he couldn't bear the thought of them reaching the same point his parents have, where they can barely stand being in the same room. The fact that Will hasn't spoken to him since the night they broke up, though, is counter-intuitive to this idea, and Mike blames himself. He wanted them to go back to being friends, but evidently Will doesn't think that's possible.

Mike's stubborn, though, and is determined to believe what El told him in June, that Will really did stay at college over summer so he could earn some money. He likes to imagine that the reason Will never takes his calls is because he changed his number and forgot to tell him. And letters getting lost between Chicago and Louisville is just... an occupational hazard. These obstinate, deliberate, delusions are what's kept Mike sane over the last year. (Well, eleven months, one week and six days, but who's counting?)

The point is, he's over it. He's over Will. Any nerves he's feeling about seeing him again are obviously just because it's been such a long time.

"Excuse me." Nancy's voice, accompanied by the clatter of silverware on her plate, interrupts his contemplations, and she stands from the table. "I have an article I have to mail to my boss by noon, and I need to proofread it."

"Yeah, me too," Mike says, seizing his opportunity and draining his orange juice.

Karen eyes him with no small amount of scepticism. "You have a magazine article to proofread?"

“Well, no,” Mike admits. “But I’m meeting the guys, I told you.”

“You did tell me. You told me you’re meeting them at ten. It’s seven-forty-five.”

“I know. I need to shower.”

“Yeah, it might take that long,” Nancy says sweetly, and he scratches pointedly at his cheek with his middle finger.

“Fine, you may go,” Karen concedes, clearly not noticing the gesture he’s directing at his sister, and Mike almost laughs; he hasn’t lived here for over a year, and his mother still thinks he was asking for her permission to leave the table.

“The one that says ‘shampoo’ goes in your hair,” his sister quips as he follows her up the stairs.

“I’ll kill you,” he says cheerfully, ignoring his mother’s sharp rebuke from behind him. Having retreated to the relative privacy of his bedroom, he dips into the drawer of his nightstand and pulls out a book.

Every year, without fail, his wonderfully predictable mother wraps the Christmas presents a week in advance, and hides them in the back of her closet, naïvely believing her children have no awareness of this arrangement. Also every year, without fail, Mike goes in and finds one of the books they’re gifting him. This done, he unwraps it, reads it, and replaces it when the presents migrate to the tree in the living room. It’s foolproof.

This year, Karen’s outdone herself, with a new release entitled *Jurassic Park*, a science fiction thriller about a group of scientists who have succeeded in cloning dinosaurs. Mike’s obsessed with it, but he’s been so busy with a college assignment that with only two days until Christmas Eve, he’s barely halfway through it.

He reads avidly for about an hour and a half, until Karen calls

through the door, telling him to hurry up and shower, so she can go in and clean. He hastily shoves the book back in the drawer and makes a dash for the bathroom.

He steps under the warm flow, stooping slightly to let the water wash through the unkempt waves of his hair. A few minutes later, someone pounds on the door, and Mike groans. "What?"

"It's me." Nancy. Of course.

"What do you want?"

"I have to pee!"

"Go downstairs!" She stomps off, and Mike rolls his eyes. He works shampoo into his hair, and is just rinsing out the suds when he hears the toilet flush downstairs, and gasps as the water almost immediately runs frigid. "*Nancy!*" he yells, diving out and shaking the cold water off his body and out of his hair. From somewhere in the house, his mother shouts at him to stop shouting, and Mike sighs with annoyance. "Asshole," he mutters furiously as he wraps his towel around him.

He makes a dash for his room and pulls on the outfit he's picked out, still shivering. Once dressed, Mike examines himself in a mirror; he's chosen cream-coloured chinos, a fitted navy button-down and a plain maroon sweatshirt. He gave up on the signature patterned sweaters of his teenage years when he started college, after Will told him, as kindly as he was able, that they were objectively hideous. He smiles cautiously at his reflection; a lifetime of unflattering nicknames has done nothing for his self-confidence, but he's been learning to find things he likes about himself. He tries not to dwell on the fact that many of these are things which Will often told him he liked.

He doesn't bother saying goodbye to anyone, but on his way past Nancy's room, Mike pushes the door open and throws his damp towel at her, relishing her shriek of disgusted fury all the way to the end of the driveway. For the most part, they get along considerably better than they used to, which Mike suspects is due to them living apart; all the same, he still likes messing with her from time to time, and he knows this feeling is mutual, hence the shower incident. Perhaps it's

a bad sign that she only got back in the early hours of this morning and they've already locked horns, but never mind. Right now, he has other concerns.

When he reaches Lucas' house, Mike sees Hopper's truck pull out of the driveway, and he freezes to the spot. The reality of the situation catches up to him as it occurs to him that this means that Will is already here. And El, of course, but right now she's not the problem, although she definitely understood a lot more than she let on when Mike saw her in town the day before.

A cloud of condensation warms his face as he exhales heavily, releasing his apprehension in this breath, then he steps up to Lucas' front door and knocks. When it opens, Lucas lets out a yell of delight and pulls Mike into a brief hug, before stepping back and letting him in. He's barely had time to take off his shoes before Dustin practically tackles him to the ground with excitement.

"I saw you at Thanksgiving, man," Mike chuckles as he recovers his breath. "Anyone would think it was a decade ago.

"It's been midterms, dude," Dustin says with feeling. "Feels like longer." Mike hears an explosion of laughter from the next room, then Max and El appear at the kitchen door, still giggling about something or other, and take turns hugging him.

"Smelled you coming," Max says by way of greeting. Honestly, it's like having a third sister.

Mike glances around, trying not to make it too obvious what – or, more accurately, *who* – he's looking for, but then the door to the Sinclairs' downstairs lavatory opens. Apparently unaware of the commotion, Will emerges, wiping his wet hands on his jeans, almost nose-to-nose with Mike. He hastily steps back as Will looks up in surprise, and Dustin coughs awkwardly.

"Hey," Mike says, his voice sounding only slightly shaky, and Will smiles faintly.

“Hi.”

“Are those new glasses?”

“Yeah, prescription changed.”

“Cool.”

He makes no move to hug Mike, or fist-bump, or... anything. Worse still, Mike knows this quiet, clipped, reserved voice: it's the tone Will reserves for people he doesn't know very well, or isn't very pleased to see. In the fifteen years Mike's known him, Will has never once addressed him using it. It's a surprise to Mike how much this realisation hurts, but he's saved from overthinking it by Lucas ushering them into the living room, which Erica hastily vacates when she sees Max opening up the *Jeopardy* box.

The game quickly becomes competitive, with Mike and Max facing off in the final round, and sparks start flying when Mike voices his opinion that Lucas, as gamemaster, is favouring his girlfriend. El tactfully volunteers to step into Lucas' role for the duration of the round, though, and the matter is quickly resolved. Throughout the game, Mike spares a few subtle glances in Will's direction; he's certainly smiling and laughing with the others. It's with a heavy heart that Mike accepts that Will specifically feels uncomfortable around *him* – which is what he's been fearing for months.

As Mike and Max enter the fifth question (or, in this case, answer) in their final round, Will excuses himself and goes to the bathroom. Fortunately, everyone's too invested in the game to notice that this is his second visit in less than an hour, but truthfully, he only needs to relieve himself from the unbearable tension in the room.

It's very possible, of course, that only he is experiencing this tension, although the others must at least be aware of it. Mike, certainly, seemed perfectly friendly when they met earlier, and Will's aware that he must have come across as rather cold, but it wasn't intentional. It was simply that every doubt he had last night, as well as every painful wound from the breakup, resurfaced upon looking into Mike's face.

Will sinks onto the toilet fully clothed, pushes his glasses up into his hair and buries his face in his hands, forcing himself to regulate his breathing. As he inhales, though, the air becomes cold and stale. The taste and stench of curdled blood and rotting flesh fills his mouth and lungs, and he retches, clapping a hand to his mouth as vomit wells in the pit of his throat.

I'm not there, he repeats over and over. *I'm in Lucas' house. I'm safe. I'm not there. I'm in Lucas' house. I'm safe.* He repeats this over and over in his head, mouthing the words as he thinks them. A gentle knock on the door startles him, and he gasps, flooding his mouth and throat with the clean, lavender-scented air of the Sinclairs' bathroom.

"Will, are you okay?" Lucas' voice is slightly muffled by the door, but it's still recognisable.

Will hastily flushes the toilet. "Just a minute!" He runs the faucet for a few moments, hoping Lucas will go back to the living room, but he's still there when he opens the door.

"You okay?" he asks again, more gently. "You were in there a while."

Will shrugs, not seeing any point in denying. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the bathroom mirror before coming out, and even he noticed he looks distinctly pale. "Difficult day."

"I know." Lucas rests a hand on his shoulder for a moment. "We're here for you. You know that, right?"

He nods gratefully, and Lucas leads him back into the living room. "He's fine," Lucas says casually. "Lock jammed." Will makes an effort to look as if this isn't the first time he's hearing about it, and retakes his seat between El and Dustin. He can feel Mike's eyes on him from the other side of the circle, but he doesn't look up until Lucas resumes the game, forcing Mike to look away.

Will tries incredibly hard to enjoy the day, and although he rarely succeeds, he pretends he's having fun, for everyone else's sake. After all, it's the first time they've all been together since New Year, and he

doesn't want to be the person who casts a shadow over their day.

The hours seem to drag by, until finally, Mrs Sinclair pokes her head around the door and informs him and El that Hopper is here to pick them up. The loud protests of the others fall on deaf ears, and Mike, Max, Lucas and Dustin crowd into the hall to see them off. Vague plans are hastily made to meet up again after Christmas, and then Lucas lets out a yelp.

"I almost forgot!"

Will's heart sinks; he was hoping Lucas wouldn't think of it until it was too late, but he dashes back into the living room and returns holding a woollen hat.

"Oh, of course!" Max exclaims, taking it, dipping her hand in and passing the hat to Mike, whose eyebrow quirks when he pulls out his little slip of paper.

They were in sophomore year of high school when Will and El, feeling immensely embarrassed, admitted that with the looming prospect of buying a new house, their respective parents had told them they would have to fund their own Christmas presents. Before telling the others this, Will confessed to El that he didn't think he could afford to buy presents for four other people out of his own pocket, as well as for her and the rest of his family. To his relief, she said the same, so they tentatively suggested they forgo gift-giving for the year. Mike, ever-practical, proposed a secret Santa, an idea which faced immediate, unanimous agreement, and they've kept this system in place ever since.

It wasn't until the following year, when Will was buying presents for El (his pseudo-sibling), Mike (now his boyfriend) and Dustin (his secret Santa), that it occurred to him that he wasn't actually saving a lot of money.

Now, though, Will is acutely aware that there is a twenty percent chance of him being forced to buy Mike a present, which he hadn't been planning to do, and which would be incredibly uncomfortable,

given the circumstances. The hat arrives at him last, and with a sinking feeling, he reaches in for the final name. He tosses the hat back to Lucas, and thumbs the paper open, hiding a sigh of relief at seeing Max's name written there in Lucas' neat print. He shoves it into his pocket with an unusually genuine smile, and a car horn toots from outside. They say their goodbyes (again), and hurry out to the old police truck on the road.

They're halfway home before Will realises he forgot to say goodbye to Mike, and guilt lingers in his chest for a few minutes as he reflects that as reconciliations go, his efforts today were deeply inadequate. Perhaps El agrees, because she twists around in the passenger seat and narrows her eyes at Will. He rolls his eyes and gazes out of the window until they roll up the driveway to the house.

Truthfully, when they moved out of the old house in the spring of his senior year, Will wasn't at all sorry to leave. That house held a record number of unpleasant memories, and after the Demogorgon, Will never really felt safe there again, and everything he looked at reminded him of those incidents. Professional plastering never fully camouflaged the hole Joyce had gouged out of the wall. Will flinched whenever the chain slid in the door; one time, without thinking, El used her powers to do it, and he was so shaken that he could have hit her. On foggy nights, Will would sometimes glance out of his window and see a tall, sinister shape twisting in the mist. Every so often, even years later, he'd move a piece of furniture and find a piece of paper with a thick black line drawn on in a frenzied scrawl. Whenever this happened, Will immediately burnt it, fury flaming in his eyes as powerful as the fire in front of him.

The new house, however, was on the other side of town entirely, on the proposed site of a shopping mall which lost funding before construction began. A housing estate was built in its place, and one property became available while they were searching, although Joyce initially had her doubts.

"I don't like new houses," she grumbled as the five of them looked

around. “Where’s the charm?” She had repeated this so often over the course of the viewing that it became an inside joke between Will, El and Jonathan, who now said it whenever they were together and encountered something they didn’t like.

“It’s not exactly new,” Hopper said, opening the oven and checking for rust. “These houses were built, what, five years ago? And someone’s moved in and out since then.”

“Big deal.” She folded her arms and tried not to admire the living room’s bay window.

“It’s in budget,” Jonathan said. He retracted his tape measure and nodded in approval. “And because it’s so new, nothing needs doing. You could just move in.”

“I like it,” El called from upstairs.

“Will?” Joyce turned to him with a vaguely desperate expression on her face, possibly expecting reinforcement, but he just smiled.

“Mom, be realistic,” he said gently. “Are you *really* going to find anything better than this?”

She scowled, and he knew they’d won. He knew that look – it was one he used when he was being deliberately difficult. “Fine,” she said at last, throwing up her hands in defeat. “You’re right. It’ll feel nicer with a coat of paint and our furniture.”

This was true, of course. They moved in a couple of months later and ever since, Will has looked forward to coming home, rather than feeling a shard of dread pierce his chest.

Until now, that is. Now, all he wants is to be back at college, with the friends who don’t know him, and the world which ignores him. Instead, he has to prepare for the sympathetic glances and ‘how are you doing’s of people who know all too well that he’s been through a breakup and just saw his ex for the first time. And he’ll have two choices – he can brush it off like it wasn’t a big deal, or he can admit the truth, which is that it was the hardest thing he’s ever had to do,

and that he actually didn't handle it all that well.

He feels himself stiffen as he walks through the front door, bracing himself for his mother's all-too-understanding tones, but she's still at work, and a different voice surprises him. "Will!"

"Oh my god," Will says with a shaky voice, as Jonathan crosses the room and pulls him into a fierce, protective hug. Taken entirely by surprise, Will buries his face in his shoulder, feeling the defensive wall he's built up around himself crumble to dust. "Your car's not here, I didn't expect you," he mumbles when Jonathan lets him go, blinking away the tears threatening to spill out. He won't let them. He's managed for the last eleven months, after all.

"Nancy drove," he explains. "We travelled through the night, and she dropped me off at about four."

Will can't even put into words how grateful he is that Jonathan makes no attempt to ask how he is, or how the day went. After Mike, his brother has always been the best at managing Will's feelings, rarely pushing for information, offering advice, or making Will feel like he's thirteen again. These days, he just listens, and comforts, which is generally what Will wants. It was for this reason that after he hung up the phone on Mike back in January, he immediately dialled Jonathan's number.

"Do you want a hand unpacking?" Will asks as Jonathan hugs El. He genuinely wants to help, but he's also hoping to lose El's interest enough that she leaves them alone for a while. Hopper's already gone into the kitchen to start dinner, and as he hoped, El takes her cue and goes to help.

"Sure, come on." A sense of deep satisfaction comes across Will when he realises that since Jonathan always gets the spare bedroom, El, as its prior occupant, has been relegated to the couch. *That'll teach her not to hold things over my head*, he thinks smugly. "There's not much to do, though," Jonathan adds, leading him up the stairs.

"Why, how long are you home?"

"Only a few days. I have to go back the day after Christmas," he says

as they enter the bedroom, and Will's heart sinks, but he adds, "but by going back so early, I can come for New Year."

Will perks up again, and takes a breath. "It was awful," he says quietly, after checking El hasn't followed them to eavesdrop. "It was like... I couldn't even talk to him."

"It was always going to be rough." Jonathan's voice is gentle, and Will nods in acknowledgement.

"I didn't think it'd be *that* bad."

"If it makes you feel any better," he remarks, lifting his suitcase onto the bed, "he was probably feeling about the same."

"You know, that actually *doesn't* make me feel better," he says, but Jonathan can tell he's not mad.

Jonathan chuckles, passes him a thick binder and points to the desk under the window. "Sorry."

"I just wish I'd never told him I liked him," Will says, being careful not to reveal too much. "Then none of this would be happening."

Jonathan hums in acknowledgement, considering this. "Do you think so?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you can never be sure what would have happened. If it wasn't this, it could have been something else," he reasons. "Sure, let's say you never told him. But you still had those feelings, right? And clearly he did too. Stuff like that... it comes out, whether you want it to or not."

"I guess," Will says, but he's not entirely convinced.

"And yeah, it *sucks*," Jonathan says sincerely. "I don't need to tell you that. But could you ever have forgiven yourself if you'd had to watch Mike move on without ever being honest with him?" Will bites his lip, keen to prove his brother wrong, but he can't think of a compelling argument. Truthfully, he's pretty sure he would have been

furious with himself. Possibly even more than he currently is. “And anyway,” Jonathan goes on, handing him his camera box. “Today was the hardest part. It’ll get easier from now on.”

“Will it?” he asks as he sets the camera down, inadvertently letting slip a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Course,” Jonathan says with an encouraging smile. “But if you want to make it work, you’ve got to *do* the work.” Will tilts his head questioningly, and Jonathan elaborates. “You know – make time for him. Let him know you want to be friends.” Silence falls for a moment. “Assuming... that is what you want?” he adds slowly, and Will hesitates.

The way he sees it, there are two inevitable outcomes if he and Mike end up friends again. The first is that they end up with a cordial relationship – amicable and civil, but nothing more, and Will doesn’t know if he could bear that, given everything they’ve been through together. The second, equally unpalatable, result would be that they get to a place where they find themselves tempted to restart things up between them, and this just seems like a bad idea.

Clearly he’s been stalling for too long, because Jonathan closes his suitcase and offers him a sad smile. “Do you want my advice?” Another good thing about his brother – his advice is never unsolicited, and if Will says no, he doesn’t give it.

“Go on then.”

“When are you next seeing him?”

“Sometime after Christmas, not sure.”

“Alright. Before then, take some time alone to work out exactly what it is you want out of this relationship – platonic or otherwise,” he hastily adds as Will looks sharply at him. “Then, once you know, be honest with him, and ask if he wants that too. That way, you can at least set yourself some realistic expectations.”

“Alright,” Will says heavily. He suddenly feels very, very tired. “Thanks.” Jonathan shrugs and smiles, and Will retreats to the attic

room, wanting to be alone for a while.

He trudges up the stairs, feeling exhausted and antsy in equal parts. For something to do, he checks the bottom drawer of the dresser, but the only thing in there is socks. One-nil to El. He curses her under his breath, resenting the attic's lack of privacy. The stairs open directly into the room, for God's sake. That said, El has, on multiple occasions, proved to be a match for any locked door, so maybe it doesn't matter either way. He sinks onto the bed with a sigh and closes his eyes, trying not to picture the hurt in Mike's eyes when they first spoke this morning.

It isn't long before he hears the front door close again, followed by a muffled hubbub of chatter from two floors below. His eyes jerk open as El yells his name up the stairs, presumably calling him for dinner. He drags himself down to the kitchen, determined to go straight back up to his room afterwards. As he passes through the hall, Will permits his mother to kiss him once on the cheek, replying vaguely when she asks him about his day. Telling Jonathan is one thing; telling her is quite another. Also, it's a pointless question: she knows his situation, and she knows where he's been today. Honestly, he's not sure why she's asking at all.

Dinner is a haze of Jonathan talking about the various mishaps on their road trip from New York, Hopper recounting an altercation with some youths defacing a bus stop in town, and El giving anecdotes from their day with the Party. Will chimes in, informing Hopper that El used her powers to summon a can of Coke at lunchtime, to get her back for taking his cigarettes.

"Jar," Hopper says bluntly, and she scowls at Will, reaching into her pocket for a dollar bill and dropping it in the jar on the counter. Joyce, however, mostly just listens to them all talking to each other, clearly tired after her shift.

Finally, she seems to notice that Will's gaze is a little less focused than usual, and she nudges him with her foot. "You can go," she says gently, and he scrapes his chair back, greatly relieved. He knows he could have gone already, but he also knows she misses him hugely when he's away at college, and likes them to be together when she comes back from work, especially when Jonathan's home too.

As he passes the living room, the clock on the mantel chimes the hour, drawing his attention to it. Will stares for a moment, trying to work out what's different, then a sly smile creeps onto his face, and he steps towards the fireplace. A small oblong packet, expertly concealed behind the clock, has become dislodged, and he swiftly slips it into his pocket. *That makes it one-one*, he thinks as he steals up the stairs.

He pulls his sketchpad and charcoals out of his suitcase and passes the remainder of the evening working on a practice piece for college. He's supposed to use a live model and experiment with different lighting and shadows, but he has some photographs for practice before working on the real thing. He's going to ask El, since all she'll have to do is sit while he takes some pictures, but he knows she's still a bit annoyed with him, and she'll be even more so when she realises he's taken the cigarettes back, so he needs to wait until she's in a better mood.

One by one, he hears the other members of his patchwork family go to bed. His mother is first, predictably, followed shortly after by Hopper. Jonathan's door shuts about an hour later, but Will knows his brother, and knows he'll be on the phone to Nancy until the early hours. They're sickening, sometimes, in Will's opinion. If he listens very carefully, the soft mumbles of the television are audible as El catches up on an episode of one of her soap operas; one of the things they've never managed to bond over, despite El's numerous attempts.

Soon enough, though, even that goes silent, and Will is alone again. He shuts the desk lamp off and climbs back up to the window to end the day as it began. A chill wind whips through the attic again, but to his surprise, it's barely even dark: the near-white snow clouds seem to reflect the light from the streetlamps, casting an umber twilight over the town and its surrounding fields.

For the first time all day, Will breathes evenly, blowing the smoke smoothly out of the window, relishing the peace and quiet. He likes city living – the freedom of regular public transport, the anonymity of

a larger population, the huge variety of people he encounters both in and out of college – but although Louisville isn't the most urban corner of the world, there's still a constant hum of traffic and people and machinery which just doesn't exist in Hawkins, least of all at night, and Will appreciates the tranquillity. He just wishes that rural towns could like him in return.

As he tosses the cigarette butt out of the window, he resists the urge to start another, and shuts the window, stashing the packet with his charcoals and shutting them in his suitcase, in the hope that El won't think to rifle through his art supplies. Then again, he reflects as he climbs into bed, perhaps it would be better if she did.

Across town, Mike can't sleep either, so he's reading again. A heavy draught excluder is covering the threshold of his bedroom door, stopping his lamplight from giving away that he's not asleep. He turns a page and rubs his eyes, which are starting to itch, determined to at least finish the chapter before he falls asleep.

The problem is, every time his eyes close, even for a second, he sees Will. Mike's still astonished at how much he's changed since he last saw him. He's changed his hair slightly, apparently trying to adopt a bolder *swish* across his head, but all it's done is make it fluffy at the front, which suits him, now that Mike's used to the effect. His new glasses frame his face well, and Mike had forgotten how much green there was in his hazel eyes. Not only that, but in the years after the Upside Down, describing his build as 'gaunt' was not much of an exaggeration. When Mike saw him this morning, Will looked stronger, and his face seemed slightly more filled-out, and Mike wonders briefly if it's because he actually managed to quit smoking, like he swore he would at the beginning of the year, and the one before it.

As much pain as it causes Mike to admit it, Will seems... better off without him. More like himself. Happier, even. Consequently, it seems cruel for the universe to force him to pull Will's name from the hat for secret Santa.

The back door opens downstairs, and Mike dives for the lamp. It can only be his father emptying the garbage into the outside trash cans,

but his bedroom window is visible from the rear porch and he doesn't need a lecture about staying up later than is healthy. He sits in the dark for a few moments, until he hears the rattle of an iron lid, and the back door closing again. A yawn escapes, and Mike decides to call it a night. He still has a bit more than a quarter of *Jurassic Park* left to read, but he's exhausted, and there'll be time to finish it tomorrow.

Stifling another successive yawn, Mike slips the book into a drawer of his nightstand and settles down, drifting off to the image of Will laughing during their *Jeopardy* game. As his eyelids flicker shut for the night, Mike's last conscious reflection is that maybe he isn't quite as over him as he thought.

2. The Gift

Summary for the Chapter:

The New Year looms, and Mike still hasn't bought Will's present. As if that wasn't enough, an incident forces him to evaluate the state of their relationship, and he reaches a chilling realisation.

Notes for the Chapter:

I literally could not tell you where all these words are coming from, but I hope you like them.

The little bell over the shop door chimes, and Mike sighs despondently. He's been staring at the same three shelves of art equipment for well over fifteen minutes, unable to work out what to choose, which is ridiculous considering how few options there are to pick from. After all, Melvald's is a general store, not an art supplier's, so it's all standard yellow pencils, post-its and scotch tape. Okay, so it's stationery, not art equipment, but that's the best he's going to find without a specialist store, and he's not aware that there is one in Hawkins.

He's also up against the clock, in more ways than one. Firstly, the Party are exchanging gifts on New Year's Eve, which is tomorrow, so he has to get Will something today, or he'll have no time to wrap it before their celebration. The other pressing issue is the fact that Mike *really* doesn't want to still be here when Joyce comes back from her lunch break. She'd come over and be far friendlier to him than he deserves, and Mike would have to explain that he's picking out a present for secret Santa, which just so happens to be for her son. Who's his ex-boyfriend. He sighs again; small-town life is profoundly frustrating.

The door to the back room opens, and Mike ducks behind the shelves, ignoring the odd look he receives from a fellow patron, and creeps to the door and makes a run for it, cringing at the sweet chime of the bell as he flees.

“Hey!” shouts a voice from behind him – a voice he knows all too well, and he stops abruptly, bracing himself. “Wait...”

He turns around, pinching his lips into an awkward smile. “Hey, Mrs Byers.”

“Mike?” Joyce looks baffled, and he can understand why. “I thought you were shoplifting.”

Creeping around the shop? Running away? Yeah, that’s a fair conclusion. “Now I think about it... that would make sense.”

“Are you?” she asks, still looking bemused, but the corners of her lips are twitching upwards.

“What? No, of course not.”

“Then why’d you run?”

Mike’s pretty sure he’s blushing scarlet by now; he couldn’t have engineered a more humiliating situation if he’d tried. In fact, he should have just sucked it up and said hello in the first place. “I don’t know,” he mutters. “I guess because...” Joyce keeps looking steadily at him, but he doesn’t finish this thought. “How, uh, how are you?”

“I’m good,” she says, and he’s certain now that she’s trying not to laugh. “How’s college going?”

“It’s going,” he replies honestly, and she finally lets herself smile.

“Sounds like things could be worse.”

Alright, what’s *that* supposed to mean? “Yeah, I guess so. I should, uh...”

“Was there something you needed?” she asks, pointing to the door, and Mike shakes his head.

“It wasn’t there. Gonna try a different store.”

“Okay,” she says, and the bemused expression returns. “Next time you can just... leave. We don’t hold you hostage until you buy

something.”

He forces a smile. “I guess not. See you around.”

She goes back into the store, and Mike walks quickly away, utterly mortified. He might not have found a present for Will, but at least he’s guaranteed that he can never again step foot in Melvald’s. Or the Byers’ house, for that matter.

He ambles back to his car, debating driving into the city to find a proper art store, or else steering into a river to quell his embarrassment. The problem is that the Party has a strict five-dollar limit on secret Santa, and at a specialist arts and crafts store, Mike would be lucky to buy Will so much as a stick of chalk. He’s climbing back into the driver’s seat when a store across the street catches his eye – Cathy’s Crafts, so-called. He’s never noticed it before, and he wonders if it’s newly-opened. Thinking it’s worth a look, he locks his car again and jogs over, ignoring the rude gesture from the driver who slammed on his brakes as Mike ran into the road. He peeks through the window into the semi-darkness, struggling to tell if it’s open at all, but then he sees someone moving around near the register. He shrugs, reasoning that he might as well go in and look around, and pushes the door open, nodding politely at the elderly clerk as she looks up at him – Cathy, he supposes.

“Good morning,” she says pleasantly. “Can I help you at all?”

“Uh – I’m not sure,” he replies. “I’m just... browsing.”

“Let me know if you need anything.”

He nods gratefully, expecting to have to take her up on this offer, because he really is out of his depth here. Will would know exactly what everything was, and Mike smiles at the thought of him hurrying back and forth, sweetly overwhelmed by the smell of the new paints, and touching every sketchbook he saw. *The paper has to feel right*, he’d say. Mike quickly applies the brakes on this sentimental line of thought, as it’s really not conducive to this whole getting-over-Will thing he’s working on.

All the same, it's given him an idea: what if he bought Will a new sketchbook? It's not a bad thought. He goes through them at a rate of knots, and always needs new ones. He scans the shelves, looking past rows and rows of acrylic and watercolour paints, chinks and charcoals, brushes and blotters – until, finally, he spots a column of shelves lined with colourful sketchbooks. *Jackpot*.

The only problem (apart from not knowing what anything is, of course) is that nothing is labelled or priced. He chooses one of the larger red ones and takes it to the counter, where Cathy checks it over and presses some buttons on her cash register.

“That'll be sixteen dollars.”

Mike pales. “Um... sorry,” he says feebly, his ears burning with unease. “I actually can't afford that. I'll go and choose something else.” He's relieved to see that she doesn't look in the least fazed; she merely passes him the sketchpad and diverts her attention back to her Marilyn French book. He replaces it, being careful not to crease it, and chooses a green one with a stiff cardboard cover. It's well under half the size of the other one, and when he opens it, the paper is thick and rough. He thinks Will would like it. “How much is this one?” he calls, holding it up. Cathy squints over her glasses, so he returns to the desk and hands it to her.

“Nine dollars,” she says, and he groans.

“Do you just... know the price of every single product, or are you making it up on the spot?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Do you want it, or not?”

“How about five dollars?” he says hopefully.

She scrutinises his earnest expression, and seems to take pity on him. “Seven-fifty, and I'll throw in a couple of pencils.”

“I can do six without the extra items.”

Cathy narrows her eyes, but the corners of her mouth twitch. “You drive a hard bargain, young man.” She presses a few more buttons on her register, and the cash tray pops open with a *ping*. “Six dollars.”

Elated, Mike fishes a five-dollar bill and four quarters from his wallet and hands them over. "Thank you," he says as she drops the book into a plastic bag, amazed at his luck.

"Just a second," she says as he goes to leave. He turns back around, and she's reaching into her desk. She pulls out two pencils and hands them over. "They're watercolours," she explains, "to go with the book. Don't drop them, or they'll break." He thanks her again, and tucks them through the sketchbook's metal binding for safekeeping. The bell rings again on his way out, and he returns to the car, feeling unusually content. The incident at Melvald's aside, that went rather well: he's found Will a solid present after frequenting only two stores, and only went over-budget by a dollar. In fact, he might even call that an unqualified success.

He heads home in an unusually good mood, but of course this quickly turns sour when he steps in the door. His mother's taken Holly to visit her parents overnight, which leaves his father in charge. Mike almost snorts at the ridiculous notion of Ted Wheeler being in charge of anything, as he doesn't even look up from the television, except to offer an automatic reproach for slamming the front door. Mike doesn't bother responding. If making that much noise isn't enough to be properly noticed, neither will be anything he has to say.

Instead, he digs out the wrapping paper from the decorations box in the attic and makes a haphazard attempt to wrap the sketchbook. He makes a couple of attempts, and decides to quit while he's ahead. If he squints, it doesn't look too lopsided, and he can tape over the excess flaps. Knowing that Will would instantly identify his handwriting, he writes the label with his left hand. This done, Mike steps back to admire his morning's handiwork, and sets it down on his desk so he'll remember it tomorrow.

With his only responsibility fulfilled for the day, he flops down on his bed and opens his book. He finished *Jurassic Park* by torchlight at one in the morning on Christmas Day, and, exactly as planned, returned it to its position under the tree unobserved. Now, he's reading *Four Past Midnight*, a new collection of short stories by Stephen King; his parents were very vocal in their disapproval of this choice of book,

and Karen chastised Nancy for buying it for him.

“What if Holly finds it and reads it?” she protested on Christmas morning, and Nancy rolled her eyes.

“Obviously Mike’s going to be careful,” she said. “Besides, he’ll take it back to college with him when he goes, so it’ll only condemn the house for a couple of weeks.”

“That’s not funny,” Ted said sternly. “There were increased reports of witchcraft in the news after *Salem’s Lot* was released.”

“That’s total crap,” Mike exclaimed. “*Salem’s Lot*’s about vampires, not witches.” For some reason, his parents were unmoved by this argument, so he and Nancy conceded the point. His mother let him keep the book, but only if he swore to put it on a high shelf in his room where Holly would not find it.

Between visiting family-friends and relatives, worrying about Will’s present and actually working on his college assignments for the holidays, Mike’s had very little time to read over the last five days, so he’s not very far in. Truthfully, when he first started reading it on Christmas Day, he was also a little put off by the first story, which featured a girl with psychic abilities who travels through a rip in reality. Generally, Mike enjoys horror books and movies, but this one hit a little too close to home for his liking.

A couple of short stories later, he’s on his way down to the kitchen to get some lunch when the doorbell rings. “I’ll get it,” he calls to his father, who apparently hasn’t moved in the last two hours. To his surprise, he’s greeted by one of Dustin’s toothy grins. “Hey,” he says cautiously, unsure if he’s forgotten some social arrangement. “What’s up?”

“I’m biking up to Sattler’s quarry,” he says. “Want to come?”

“Just us?” Mike says, and Dustin looks affronted.

“You don’t have to.”

“No, I want to,” Mike says hastily. “Give me ten minutes?” He closes the door gently, not wanting to appear to be slamming the door in Dustin’s face. It’s not that he minds going alone with Dustin; it’s just that Mike’s just a little suspicious that this is some sort of setup on his friends’ part to reconcile him and Will. It wouldn’t be the first time Dustin’s pulled such a stunt.

Mike quickly makes himself a sandwich and packs it into one of the paper bags his mother uses for Holly’s school lunches, then hurries around to the back of the house for his bike. He’s outgrown it really, as it’s the same one he’s had since he was fourteen, but he’s so fond of it that he refuses to let his mother throw it out, so it’s been sitting in the shed, unused, since the summer. It groans as he eases the pedals into motion, and the brakes aren’t *quite* as sharp as they used to be, but it works well enough for a brief jaunt up to the quarry and back.

He’d have preferred a different destination, if he’s honest – he has precisely zero good memories of Sattler’s quarry – but the fact is that Hawkins doesn’t have many good cycle routes, and the cliff path overlooking the flooded quarry is easily the most interesting. With this in mind, Mike doesn’t object, and falls in behind Dustin, riding in his slipstream to shield himself against the wind. It’s easy, and familiar, and comforting – like they’ve just started middle school again, and are exploring areas of Hawkins that were off-limits before.

The path starts to climb, gradually at first as they leave the town behind them, then steeper as they approach the quarry. Mike winces as he crunches through the gears, and lets out a yelp as his pedals suddenly start spinning wildly, all control of the wheels lost.

“Damn it – Dustin!” he shouts, braking hard to stop himself from rolling backwards, and clambering off.

“What?” He’s a little way ahead, but he stops and turns around.

“My chain’s slipped!”

“*What?*” Dustin yells back, and Mike sighs – clearly Dustin knows he’s

shouting into the wind; why can't he just come back? Mike beckons him over, and Dustin reluctantly climbs off his bike and descends the slope again. "What's the matter?" he says when he gets back, clearly out of breath. Unwilling to repeat himself, Mike points to his bike's chain, hanging limply from the pedal gear. "Ah."

"I think I can put it back on, if you can hold the gear in place." Dustin nods, and seizes the frame with one hand, and the pedal with the other, holding it still while Mike pulls at the old chain, his tongue slipping out between his lips as he concentrates.

"You need some oil on it," Dustin murmurs, and Mike sighs with annoyance.

"Sure, Dustin, let me just reach into the pocket dimension I stored it in."

He channels his irritation into his pitiable upper body strength, forcing the chain further and further forward until he finally slips on of the links over the pedal gear's teeth. Dustin swiftly slides his fingers out of the way as Mike eases the rest of the chain into place, letting out a *whoop* of delight when he spins the pedal without losing the chain.

"Nicely done," he says admiringly as Mike stands up. "I was fully expecting to have to walk home."

"Yeah, that's not happening," Mike says between heavy breaths. He's always been the least athletic of any of his friends, and that operation was actually quite strenuous. He heaves his bike back onto its wheels and starts walking it up the hill, hoping Dustin will suggest having a rest when they reach the top.

Sure enough, when they reach the highest point, Dustin flips down his bike prop and sits down on the edge, swinging his legs over the edge. Mike chooses a spot a few feet back, prompting a grin from Dustin.

"Scared?"

"A little," Mike says drily. "After all, I have gone over once before."

Dustin sobers up immediately, and joins Mike on the grassy ground, away from the edge. "My bad."

"I can't believe you forgot."

"I didn't *forget*," he insists. "I just... didn't make the connection that it was here."

"Right. So in other words, you forgot." They're silent for a moment, each lost in his own reminiscences.

"So what's going on with Will?" Dustin asks after a few minutes, and Mike sighs silently. *There it is.*

"Nothing," he says, truthfully.

"Bullshit. Things are weird between you, we've all noticed," he says. "You're throwing the whole group dynamic off."

"Yeah, I know."

"I mean, I know you guys broke up, but it wasn't exactly recent."

"The thing is," Mike says slowly, "before last week, we hadn't actually seen each other since we broke up."

Dustin digests this. "Huh. That... would explain it." He ponders for a moment longer, then looks at Mike in astonishment. "Wait, you haven't seen Will since *January*?"

"Haven't even spoken."

"Man, you *really* suck at breakups."

"Bite me."

Dustin whistles through his teeth. "No wonder it's been weird." Mike nods gloomily. "Are things any better?"

"I don't know, really," Mike says with a shrug. "A little, I guess. I don't think it felt as awkward when we were together the other day."

Did you notice?"

"It was certainly better," he concedes, "but I wouldn't say it was good."

Mike hums an affirmative and says, "I got him for secret Santa."

Dustin looks scandalised. "You're not supposed to say!"

"Oh, get a grip, everyone cheats at secret Santa. It's tradition."

"What did you get him?"

"A new sketchbook and a couple of pencils."

"Shit, you got that for five dollars?" He sounds impressed, but a little sceptical.

"More or less. The pencils came for free."

"I got El," Dustin says, sounding disheartened. "I bought her some comics."

"Dustin, you've bought comics for every secret Santa we've done."

"It's not my fault, I never know what else anybody likes!" Mike rolls his eyes fondly. It's always immediately obvious whose present is from Dustin, because despite being incredibly thoughtful in other situations, he is the absolute worst when it comes to choosing gifts. "Do you still like Will?"

The sudden question takes Mike entirely by surprise, and he reacts defensively. "Of course I like him, are you stupid?"

"I don't mean that, and you know it. Do you still *love* him?"

"No," he says, possibly slightly too fast, and Dustin raises an eyebrow.

"Okay," he says with a little shrug, and with this, he stands up and returns to his bike. "Come on, it's freezing. Race you to the memorial stone?"

“What are we, ten?” Mike says incredulously, but he slings one leg over the frame and starts pedalling away before Dustin’s even kicked up his prop. “See you down there!”

“Oh, come on!”

His remonstrance is lost to the wind as Mike shoots off down the old downhill track. He doesn’t even need to pedal, he just freewheels and steers minutely, dodging rocks that have become dislodged from the cliff walls towering over him on either side. Mike starts applying his brakes as the road looms, but the damp ground has frozen, and he can’t get a grip.

He can still hear Dustin cursing him from behind as he shoots out into the road. A car horn sounds, and he feels the rush of its slipstream as it swerves around him, missing his rear mudguard by mere inches. Mike plummets into the dry ditch separating the road from the adjacent field, and groans as he rolls off his bike into the mud, as two sets of brakes squeal from behind him. A car door slams, and Mike hears heavy boots hit the ground.

“What the *hell* do you think – oh,” says a gruff voice. “It’s you.”

“Shit, Mike, are you okay?” Dustin’s face appears in Mike’s vision, followed closely by Chief Hopper’s, looking thoroughly unimpressed. Dustin reaches a hand down to Mike, grunting with exertion as he helps him out of the ditch. Hopper, by contrast, stoops down and lifts Mike’s bike out with one hand, dropping it unceremoniously into the back of his truck.

“Thanks, but you don’t need to – ”

“On the contrary, Mr Wheeler, I think I do,” Hopper says in the low, dry voice he saves for police work. “You’d better get in. Both of you.”

The front door slams, and Will hears the familiar jingle of keys being tossed into a basket.

“I’m home!” Joyce calls, and Will and El regard each other with wide eyes.

“You’re home early,” Will replies from the living room. They planned to have the room back to normal by the time their parents came back from work.

“No I’m not. It’s Sunday, we close at three.” Of course, it’s Sunday. Because he’s not at college, he’s completely lost track of the days, and clearly El has as well. “Wait ‘til I tell you what happened this...” Joyce tails off as she enters the living room and leans against the doorframe. “Uh, what’s going on here?”

Admittedly the scene is strange, even to Will, who knows exactly what it’s for. El is perched on a small stool in the centre of the room, dressed all in black with her shoulder-length hair tied up in a bun – unusual choices for her. All the furniture has been pushed to the walls, and in its place, Will’s set up a circle of lights, using every desk and floor lamp in the entire house, at varying angles around El. The room is shrouded in semi-darkness, and half of El’s face and body are entirely unlit. The effect is indeed most peculiar.

“It’s for a project,” he explains. “I’m experimenting with shadows.”

“At the detriment of our electricity bill, apparently,” Joyce says, folding her arms.

“We turned everything else off,” El pipes up, helpfully.

Joyce rolls her eyes. “I guess it’s not as bad as when you used my oven as a kiln.”

“That was one time!” Will protests as his mother wanders off to hang up her coat.

El grins at him, and he grimaces back in amusement. They are, so far, having rather a good few days. They had a brief spat this morning when Will accidentally finished El’s favourite cereal, but he found her a packet of waffles from the stash Hopper won’t let her find, and they called it even. When El realised he’d stolen his cigarettes back from behind the clock the week before, she was livid, but said she’d help him with his project if he went for a week without having any. Will agreed to these terms, and El upheld her end of the deal. Of course, he knows exactly where she’s hidden them and fully intends to take

them back once he's got the photos he needs, but she doesn't need to know that.

It's not even like he always needs them. He wasn't lying to El last week when he said he hadn't had any in months. His habit was never that severe in the first place; in fact, he can't remember a day when he's had more than two or three, even when he's been at his most anxious. Then, at the beginning of the semester, he stopped buying them altogether, fighting through the first week of withdrawal with chewing gum and vast amounts of caffeine (which is a whole other issue). He's very aware that it was the best decision he'd made all year, not least because he was able to increase his food budget and actually start eating proper meals.

No, he doesn't need them. He just likes to know they're there, in case he does.

Now, though, he's fine, and he rolls his gum to the other side of his mouth as he changes the light source on El.

"Are we done yet?" she asks after a little while.

"The way I see it," he says patiently, stooping for a low-angle shot, "we can either be absolutely sure I have everything I need, or we can do this again in a few days' time when the photos are developed and I'm missing some."

"Fine," she grumbles. He works in silence for a few minutes, but then the phone in the hall rings, making them both jump.

"Can one of you get that?" Joyce yells from somewhere in the house.

Will groans, and holds up a finger to El, who starts to stand up. "Don't you dare." He leans over the ring of lights and passes her the camera, then jogs to the hall. "Hello?"

"Hey, Will, is your mom back yet?" It's Hopper, and Will blinks in surprise.

"She got back about ten minutes ago. Why?"

"I need her to come down to the station."

"Is she under arrest?" Will jokes, but Hopper doesn't laugh.

"No, but Mike's here, and no one's picking up the phone at home."

Will accidentally swallows his gum in shock, and coughs a few times before speaking again. "You want Mom to come pick him up?"

"If she's free. I'd take him home myself, but Flo's gone for the night and there's no one else here."

"Hold on, let me check." He leaves the phone dangling by its cord and takes the stairs two at a time. "Mom?"

"I'm in the shower!" He explains the situation through the door, and she asks, "Can you go?"

"I haven't driven in months," he protests; he knows this is a very weak argument, but it's the best he can think of.

"Will," she says reproachfully, and he rolls his eyes. The unspoken words *he's your friend* hang in the air, and he lets out a guttural groan of frustration.

"Fine." He stamps back downstairs to the phone. "Hey, Hop. I'm coming."

"Thanks, kid. See you when you get here."

As he passes the living room, he finds El still perched dutifully on her stool. "You're excused," he says shortly. "I'll be back in half an hour." She can clearly tell he's irate, and thankfully doesn't ask any questions.

Will spends the drive down to the station seething. His mother's ancient coupe rattles, even on the relatively new road that connects their housing estate to the town centre. Sometimes it genuinely feels

like the universe is pointing and laughing at him – Mike gets arrested, or something, and *of course* no one else can take him home but Will. It really is just his luck.

He pulls to a stop in one of the slanted parking spaces outside, and throws the station door open a lot more roughly than he normally would. He marches down to Hopper's office, where Mike springs to his feet as he walks in. He starts to speak, but Will cuts him off with a look before turning to Hopper. "Do I need to sign anything?"

"No, we're good. I just wanted to make sure he doesn't get himself killed on his way home."

Mike flushes with embarrassment, and Will's expression shifts from anger to confusion as he looks from one to the other. "So... he hasn't been arrested?"

"Of course not!" Mike says hotly.

"He's been cautioned," Hopper replies, ignoring him and addressing Will instead.

"For what?" Mike protests, and Hopper bites his lip to keep his temper.

"As I've told you three times, Sattler's quarry is a public safety hazard. There were signs saying keep out, which you ignored."

"Didn't notice," he mutters, and Will almost laughs with disbelief.

"You went up to – ? You know what," he says, forcing himself to calm down, "whatever. Come on."

He offers Hopper a curt nod, then stalks out with Mike hot on his heels.

"It wasn't my fault," Mike says quickly, and now Will really does laugh, albeit humourlessly.

"Never is."

“It was Dustin’s idea!”

“And he dragged you kicking and screaming, did he?” Unsurprisingly, Mike has no answer to this. “Presumably his mom picked him up,” he goes on. “Why couldn’t she take you home?”

“There wasn’t space in their car,” he mumbles as Will presses the key fob to let them in.

They sit in silence for a moment; Will slots the key into the ignition but doesn’t turn it. “Why did Hop say that? About you getting yourself killed?”

Mike’s expression softens. “My bike slipped on the ice, and I skidded into the road. Hopper almost hit me.”

Will’s knuckles turn almost white as he grips the steering wheel. “Christ. *Christ*.”

“I know.”

“For fuck’s *sake*, Michael!” Will explodes, before pulling off his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“It was an accident,” Mike says, now utterly abashed.

“An accident! Can you take even a *moment*,” Will says, his voice scarcely more than a hiss, “to imagine what I would have – ”

He stops himself, jams his glasses back onto his face and turns the ignition key to muffle the watery cough that’s forcing its way out of him. For a moment just then, he forgot. He forgot, even after all this time, that Mike isn’t his boyfriend anymore, and that he’s barely even his friend. Will shakes his head and lurches the car into reverse, deliberately making Mike jolt as he accelerates hard away from the police station.

He knows the route to Maple Street blindfold, and clearly Mike senses that there’s little to say as he makes the correct turns to the edge of town. Finally, though, Will can bear the silence no longer, he says, “I’m sorry I snapped.”

“It’s alright. I deserved it.”

Will doesn’t bother asking whether he means now, and says nothing for the rest of the journey.

As he closes the front door behind him, Mike leans back against it and groans. *Well, that was an unmitigated disaster.*

In Mike’s experience, Will doesn’t get angry all that often, and shows it even less. Strong, honest communication isn’t exactly Will’s strong point, so when he’s cross, he generally just goes quiet and fidgety, and it’s very rarely directed towards Mike. Consequently, he can’t think of a single time in fifteen years when Will has lost his temper at him as he did today, and it was not pleasant.

A soft snore sounds from the living room, and Mike wonders if his father has moved even once in the last four hours. He finds it ridiculous that he could possibly have slept through six calls to the house phone, but he also doesn’t want to consider the notion that Ted heard the calls and decided not to bother answering.

He wanders down into the basement and picks up the phone there, having decided to order a pizza with the money his mother left them for food. He’s starving, and clearly Ted doesn’t want anything. This done, he powers up his new Super Nintendo (a Christmas present from his grandparents) and waits for the doorbell, having asked them to bring it round to the basement door at the back.

The arrangement gives him a bizarre sense of déjà-vu, as this arrangement is depressingly similar to a lot of his nights spent at college this year – sat alone in a room playing video games, waiting on food he doesn’t want to share with anyone.

Can you take even a moment to imagine what I would have...

The words bounce around his head like the *Pong* ball, the hurt in Will’s voice ringing each time they hit a corner. Mike groans and puts down the controller between levels, pressing his fingers to his eyes and rubbing hard, hating how much he wants to know how that sentence was going to end.

...what I would have done if something had happened to you?

That's the logical conclusion to that sentence, right? He stands up and paces the floor, profoundly overwhelmed by the volume of the thoughts in his head. What else could Will have been planning to say?

But that's ridiculous, he thinks in confusion. *Will doesn't care about me; he's made that very clear over the last week and a half at least.*

But if not that... what? Mike slumps back onto the faded couch cushions and sighs, jumping as someone knocks on the external door. He grabs the money from the television table as he passes it, and thanks the delivery driver with a reasonably generous tip.

Besides, he muses as he curls up with the first slice, *even if he was going to say that, so what? It's not like we could get back together.* This was, of course, absolutely out of the question: Mike's seen first-hand what happens to long relationships over time, and the idea of him and Will becoming like his mother and father chills him to the core. He hardly ever stops to even entertain the notion. He can't bear the thought of being in a position with Will where they sit in silence because they simply don't have anything to say to each other.

Suddenly, he feels incredibly nauseated, and he puts down his pizza. It's already happened. They're already *at* that point. The scenario he just envisaged is the exact situation they were in on the car-ride home.

This realisation haunts him for the next twenty-eight hours, until the rest of the Party are gathered in Will and El's attic. Mike's basement used to be their designated hangout for all gatherings, and often still is, but here, they can climb out onto the roof at midnight and watch the fireworks over the country club.

Before that happens, though, there are a few orders of business, as Lucas so officially puts it. The first concerns secret Santa, and El brings up a cardboard box containing six gifts. Of course, the fact that they know each other so well always ruins a lot of the anonymity:

Will and El always end up using the same wrapping paper, and neither Dustin nor Mike could wrap a gift to save their lives. By process of elimination, Lucas and Max's presents are identifiable, so the only real mystery is which member of each pair gave each gift. It's still enjoyable, though, and Mike thinks half the fun is working out who picked whom.

Lucas counts down from three, and the circle turns into a laughing frenzy of tearing paper. Mike notes the neat gift-wrapping, and finds a second-hand fantasy book and a bar of his favourite chocolate. He catches Lucas' eye and tilts his head questioningly; Lucas grins in reply, confirming his theory, and Mike nods by way of thanks, before turning his attention to Will.

He and El are lying on their fronts on the end of the bed, looking so bizarrely similar that Mike has to take a moment to remind himself that they're not actually twins. Will slides a finger under a loose tab of paper Mike forgot to tape down and tears, his mouth dropping open in genuine, unrestrained delight at what he finds underneath. His excitement intensifies as he opens it, running his fingers along the coarse pages, as Mike knew he would. He nudges El with his shoulder, and she looks up from one of the comics she's been thumbing through. Her lips round into an inaudible *ooh* of admiration as she takes it from him, and she's the first to notice the pencils tucked into the sketchbook's binding, taking one out and showing it to Will.

Will examines the present and the wrapping paper, and Mike waits with bated breath, until Will glances down at him and smiles gratefully. Mike nods in acknowledgement, but then his attention is diverted by Dustin, who throws a puzzle cube into his hands.

"From Will," he says excitedly, and Max frowns, pausing her conversation with Lucas.

"I thought mine was from Will?" she says, looking up at him and El, who wisely reveal nothing.

As midnight draws near, they bundle up in their coats and scarves

and climb out of the window onto the roof, where the country club's floodlights are powering down in preparation for the firework display. Mike finds himself between Will and Max at the centre of the group, and Mike hears Will's gentle voice, even over Max and Lucas' excitable conversation on his other side.

"Thank you for the book," he says. "It's exactly what I need for one of my classes next semester."

"No problem," Mike says, deciding not to recount the difficulty he had in acquiring it.

"There was a five-dollar limit, though," Will remarks, and Mike chuckles.

"I bartered for it."

Will snorts. "This is Hawkins high street, not a Persian market."

"I don't need you to believe me," Mike says good-naturedly, and Will shrugs.

"Whatever. It was a nice gift."

"You're welcome." Will's gloved hand is resting on the tiles, supporting his weight, and Mike half-considers placing his own on top of it, before shaking his head and coming back to his senses. He's not about to ruin the most friendly conversation he's shared with Will all week. Besides, Will has already turned away and started talking to El on his other side.

"One minute," Lucas announces from the end of the line, the expectant buzz of chatter increases, as Max nudges Mike and shows him one of the pairs of brightly-coloured woollen socks she got in her secret Santa. *Will*, he thinks immediately, but he decides not to recommence the earlier debate with less than a minute until midnight. "Ten!" Lucas calls, and they join him in a chant, counting down.

They've just called *six* when the sky lights up across the valley, rending the air with bangs, whistles and vibrant lights. The Party bursts out laughing, and a cry of "Happy New Year!" goes up around

the group. El and Dustin boo as Lucas and Max lean in for a kiss, and Will turns to Mike and smiles sadly.

“Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” Mike echoes, hoping he means it.

When the fireworks die down, they move carefully back towards the little window, and climb back inside one by one. “Fine time for Lucas to find out his watch is slow,” Dustin remarks as he drops into the room.

“Bite me,” Lucas shoots back, but there’s no venom in it.

Realising they’ve run out of snacks, Will goes downstairs to sneak a few plates of food from the adults’ party table. He can make out a few voices – namely Jonathan and Nancy’s, who are definitely only showing their faces on their way to Steve Harrington’s house party – but most of them are Joyce and Hopper’s friends from work. Come to think of it, he can’t see his mother or Hopper anywhere.

El appears at his side as he’s loading bread, cheese and meats onto a paper plate. “Nice one,” he says, passing her one. “Grab some dessert stuff.”

“On it.” She takes a piece from each of the cake plates, as well as a few profiteroles, before opening the freezer and balancing a tub of ice cream precariously on top. Will rolls his eyes: he likes ice cream as much as anyone, but El’s obsessed with the stuff, and will never say why. Nevertheless, he retrieves six spoons from the silverware drawer on his way out. They might as well be civilised about it.

They eat, chat and play games for nearly two more hours, until finally, Will puts a hand to his mouth to cover a loud, deliberate yawn, and the others agree they should be heading home. Will and El show them out, and they agree to meet up again in a few days, before they all have to go back to college. Mike smiles shyly at him on the way to his car, and lingers only a moment before Max yells at him to hurry up, having agreed to give the others a lift home. Will raises a hand in farewell, and El squeezes his hand encouragingly as the car

pulls away.

Thoroughly exhausted, Will resists the urge to smoke, and he makes time only to wash his face and brush his teeth before crawling into bed, barely even remembering to take off his glasses. The earnest look in Mike's eyes as he wished him a happy New Year flashes across Will's mind's eye, and although his dreams are dominated by Mike leaning in to kiss him on the roof, by the time the morning comes, he's forgotten all about it.

3. The Announcement

Summary for the Chapter:

The Byers-Hopper family receive some unexpected news, and Mike and Will find themselves alone for the first time.

A gentle gust of wind blows away a stray cloud, and the full force of the morning sun pierces through the fog of sleep. Will moans in annoyance, rolling over and pulling his pillow over his head, but the entire room is now lit, and with a sigh, he resolves that sleeping is over for the day. Honestly, considering the emotional turmoil he's been put through over the last week, six and a half hours is a really quite impressive amount.

He kicks the duvet back and reaches for the sweater he's left draped over the end of the bed, then wanders downstairs, drawn towards the scent of fresh coffee. Jonathan's in the kitchen, pouring out two mugs, and he smiles sleepily at Will as he walks in.

"I made extra," he says by way of greeting. "Want some?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic?" Will mumbles, slumping down on the kitchen table and burying his face in the crook of his elbow.

Jonathan chuckles and places the coffee in front of him, ruffling his hair as he sits down in his own seat. "Rough night?"

"Rough life," Will says, his voice muffled.

"Did you talk to Mike yet?"

"I guess you could say we had words," he replies, lifting his head grumpily and curling his hands around the mug in front of him.

"Right." Clearly Jonathan isn't sure what to make of this, and Will can't be bothered to elaborate.

"We had a nice conversation last night, though," he says instead. "He bought me a sketchbook."

“He was your secret Santa?”

Will nods. “Yeah. It was thoughtful.” He sips the coffee and grimaces. “This is weak as piss,” he complains, and before he’s finished speaking, Nancy walks in. *Ah. That explains it.* The Wheeler and Byers families take their coffee very differently, Will has observed in the past.

“Morning.” She smiles at Will and kisses the top of Jonathan’s head, stirring cream and sugar into her coffee. Jonathan can obviously tell Will’s judging her for it, and he catches his eye, smiling. “What?” she says suspiciously as she joins them at the table.

“Nothing,” Jonathan replies innocently, and Will smirks into his cup.

“How was your party?” he asks, and Jonathan grimaces.

“A *little* too wild for my taste.”

“Oh, it wasn’t that bad,” Nancy tuts. “There were only, like, twenty people, tops.”

“Which is about eighteen more than I like.”

“I’m sorry,” Will says drily, “do you want me to go?”

They both chuckle at that, and Nancy shakes her head. “He’s just annoyed because he had a good time, having been adamant that he wouldn’t.”

“I don’t do that.”

“You *do*.”

“No, she’s right, you do that,” Will chimes in, and Jonathan shoots him a look of shocked betrayal.

The toilet flushes in the room above them, and the three of them look up when they hear more footsteps on the stairs. El wanders in, sliding onto Will’s chair and nudging him across, followed by Joyce and

Hopper. It's becoming crowded. El's apparently in one of her clingy moods, but Will very much is not, so he pushes her off the chair. She scowls at him, but hoists herself up onto the kitchen counter instead, while Joyce and Hopper sit down at the table. Hopper's already dressed for work, but Joyce is still in her pyjamas, and she starts boiling some water to make more coffee.

"I'm glad you're all here," she says, and Will, El and Jonathan exchange an alarmed look, but Joyce is too busy looking at Hopper to notice. "Do you..?"

Hopper nods, and steeples his hands on the table, looking primarily at Will and Jonathan. "Last night, I asked your mother to marry me."

"Oh my god, congratulations!" Nancy exclaims as Joyce holds out a hand, revealing an engagement ring. "That's so exciting!"

"You're engaged?" Jonathan says slowly, and they both nod, beaming.

"I thought you were already engaged," says El from the countertop, and Will voices his agreement.

Joyce and Hopper's delighted expressions fade quickly to confusion. "No, not until last night."

"I thought that was why you got the house," Will adds, and his mother laughs nervously, but stops when she realises that they're being totally serious.

"No, we got the house because we wanted to live together," she explains, a little too patiently, as if they're half their age. "Jonathan, did you think..?"

"No," he says dismissively, but Will isn't sure how truthful he's being.

"It's great news, Joyce," Nancy says before Jonathan can say anything incriminating. "For both of you."

An uncomfortable tension hangs in the air, and perhaps Nancy senses

it, because she whispers something to Jonathan, drains her coffee and excuses herself.

“So this news is coming as a surprise to no one?” Joyce says once she’s gone.

“It’s not like we knew you were about to announce it,” Will says reasonably, and Joyce pinches the bridge of her nose between finger and thumb.

“Well, this was probably the most underwhelming engagement announcement of all time,” Hopper says, although he sounds considerably more amused than Joyce does. “I’ll see you all later.” He kisses Joyce on the cheek and rises from the table, hugging El and patting Will on the shoulder on his way past.

“So,” Will says, feeling more than a little awkward, “have you, uh, set a date?”

“We were thinking April,” his mother says, “but nothing more specific than that. Jon, are you okay?”

“Fine,” he says, looking up from his coffee at last. “It’s great, Mom, really.”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” she says, looking at each of them in turn.

“We are,” El says hastily. “It’s just... hard to be excited when we thought it already happened.” Will hums in accord, and Joyce hangs her head in disbelief.

“Sorry,” Will calls weakly as she wanders out of the kitchen.

“Jonathan?” El says gently once she’s gone. “Are you alright?”

“I should have seen this coming,” he says quietly. “Hop asked me months ago.”

“Asked you what?”

“You know, for permission.” El and Will both look blankly at him.

“Traditionally, when a guy wants to get married, he asks her father for permission. Hop came to me and asked instead.”

“He asked you for permission to marry Mom?” Will says in surprise, and Jonathan nods.

“Of course I said yes, I’m not an asshole, but when they didn’t announce anything, I assumed he’d changed his mind.”

Will can see the concern in his brother’s eyes, and guesses what’s worrying him. “Hop isn’t like Dad.”

“No, I know he’s proved that. But it’s still difficult, you know?” Will nods, and El shakes her head. “Anyway,” Jonathan continues briskly, “we want to be back in New York by ten tonight, so I need to get a move on.” He leaves his cup in the sink and disappears back upstairs. Will and El exchange a glance, and Will shrugs, diverting his attention back to his coffee.

After Mike left last night, Will realised with some annoyance that he forgot to ask him where he found the sketchbook, because he wants to go and have a look around. The book and pencils Mike gave him are perfect for watercolours, but he also needs some bigger paper for his charcoal pictures. Sure, he could buy some in Louisville, but if Mike honestly got that book for about five dollars, then it’s definitely worth looking in Hawkins first. Art, regrettably, is one of the more expensive degree choices, because although the school subsidises a bit, he keeps having to buy supplies when they run out. *At least Dustin’s graphing calculator will last him the whole four years*, he often thinks bitterly. So, with a heavy heart, he resolves to stop by the Wheelers’ house and ask about the store, hoping Mike doesn’t think it’s too weird that this is the only reason he’s visiting.

First, though, he has to enlarge the negatives from the photos he took of El the other day. He took the film to the photography shop in town to develop, but their enlarging fees were pricey, so to keep costs down, Will’s doing it himself. His Christmas present from Jonathan, to his delight, was the old projection plane from the newspaper office where he works, which recently acquired a new one, and he knows

the method, so he can do it quite easily by converting the attic into a temporary darkroom.

He's already finished fitting black construction paper to the window, and El's on the landing pinning up a thick curtain to cover the stair passage. He's 'borrowed' his mother's clothesline and some pegs to hang the pictures on, and has warned everyone in the house, on pain of death, not to go into the attic while they're developing.

When everything's set up, Will runs a few tests to check the level of exposure that he needs, then begins the procedure, enlarging the film shot by shot, exposing each one briefly to the light, before dipping them briefly into the development bath. This monotonous routine takes him over two hours, during which time, he's only interrupted once by the departure of Jonathan and Nancy, who hug him and wish him luck with the next semester.

"Call if you need to," Jonathan says on his way out, and Will nods gratefully, before heading back upstairs to continue.

By the time he's done, several strings of photos run around the perimeter of the room, and Will smiles with satisfaction at his work. Of the two of them, Jonathan's always been the photographer and Will's always been the artist, but he likes taking his own pictures and drawing from them, rather than just using someone else's references.

He goes downstairs, slipping past the curtain through as narrow a gap as he can manage, and calls to the house in general that he's going out. Only Joyce, off work for New Year's Day, calls back an affirmative, so he figures El must be out at Max's, or something. He shrugs and goes to unlock his bike from the porch railing, but to his surprise, it's not there. Neither is the lock.

"Mom!" he hollers, storming back into the hall. "Someone's stolen my bike!"

"No, they haven't," she says, and he scoffs.

"Do you see it out there?"

"As it happens, I have seen it," she replies, folding her arms across her chest. "I saw El riding it away about an hour ago."

Will opens his mouth to retort, but finds he has none. "Can I borrow the car?" he says in a small voice. Joyce pulls the keys from her pocket, but doesn't let go when he tries to take them. "Please?"

"And?"

He scowls at her. "Sorry for yelling."

"There we go." She clasps the keys tightly in her hand and marches out of the front door.

"What are you doing?"

"I need the car later, so I'm driving you into town."

"What? Then why did we just go through all of that?"

"It was funny," she says innocently. "You still want a ride?"

In truth, he doesn't really want her to drive him, because it means he'll have to admit that he's going to Mike's. She will then ask questions which he doesn't want to answer, and he'll have to tell her that he's only going to get information, and she'll tell him he's being ridiculous, and...

His train of thought tails off, and he sighs in defeat. The fact is that he can't walk to Mike's: it's well over two miles, and much of the journey is on a long, straight road where the speed limit is rarely observed. So, loathed as he is to admit it, he needs her.

"Sure," he says, as moodily as he can manage, and climbs into the passenger seat.

"So, where to?" she asks brightly; Will's starting to wonder if she even needs the car, or whether she just wanted an excuse to go out somewhere with him.

"The Wheelers'," he says reluctantly, but to his astonishment, Joyce doesn't question it, she just turns the key in the ignition, bringing the neglected engine spluttering into life. "I'm not staying," he adds, suddenly feeling the need to justify himself. "I just need to ask where he bought my Christmas gift."

"I hope you know what you're doing," she says gently as they turn onto the main road, but unusually, she offers no further advice or criticism. Will wonders if she's taken a page out of Jonathan's book. He fumbles with the old radio, and Joyce hums along to the tune that crackles out as he fixes the tuning. It's a Joan Jett and the Blackhearts song from a couple of years ago, unless he's very much mistaken, but he doesn't know it very well. He's surprised his mom does though; maybe El's been catching her up on modern music.

*I hate myself for loving you
Can't break free from the things that you do
I wanna walk but I run back to you
That's why I hate myself for loving you*

He turns it off.

Mike hears a car pull up to the drive and frowns, unsure who it could be. After all, his mother and Holly got back an hour ago, his father only just left for the golf club, where he never stays for less than three hours, and he knows Nancy's not coming home en-route to New York. He listens for a few more moments, but the engine doesn't turn off. Weird.

He shrugs it off and keeps writing, having woken up this morning and realised he only has four more days to complete the literature analysis he's been putting off for the last twelve days. His father was disdainful when Mike announced that he intended to major in Literature and the English language, deeming it a 'soft subject', but a year and half in, Mike couldn't disagree more. It's pretty damned difficult, actually, and at least Lucas and Dustin, both studying sciences, never need to have an original thought in their lives, whereas he's been told he should ideally come up with at least one interpretation that no one's thought of before in each essay, which is incredibly stressful. Of course they don't actively penalise him if he

doesn't, but he has noticed a positive correlation between the originality of his interpretations and his grade.

He's halfway through a sentence when the doorbell rings, startling him, and his pen jolts across the paper, scratching a neat blue line through the middle of his page. "Fuck," he hisses, drawing out the first consonant for emphasis. He hears voices at the door, and his mother sounds pleasantly surprised, so with his curiosity piqued and his motivation through the floor, he creeps to the staircase to see who's calling.

"We haven't seen you in ages!" Karen's saying with delight, ushering their visitor in. Mike's eyes widen when he spots a familiar head of chestnut hair, and he ducks out of sight. "Mike!"

"Coming!" he calls, softening his tone a little in a vague effort to create the illusion that he's further away than he is. He waits a few moments, then pads down the stairs, feigning nonchalance upon seeing Will in his house for the first time all year. "Hey."

"Hi," says Will calmly, putting on the same act and matching Mike's energy.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Karen asks, but Will shakes his head.

"Thanks, but I'm not staying, I just needed to ask Mike something." Of course, this phrase makes his heart stop, and perhaps Will realises the terrifying implications of this statement, and adopts a subtly contrite expression.

"I'll leave you to it," Karen says cheerfully, and wanders off to the kitchen.

"What, uh, what was it you wanted?" Mike asks, plunging his hands uncomfortably into his pockets.

"Just where you bought my sketchbook," Will replies simply. "I thought I'd pay a visit."

"It's called Cathy's Crafts," Mike says, "on the other side of the square from Melvald's."

“Sweet,” Will says. “Thanks.”

“You’re... you’re going now?”

“Yeah, why?”

“It’s New Year’s Day,” Mike says, chuckling awkwardly. “Basically nothing’s open.”

Will closes his eyes and sighs, and Mike wonders what he’s thinking. “Of course it is.”

“Bummer,” Mike says with feeling, and Will nods slowly.

“Well, never mind. I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

“Sure.” Will turns to go, and before he can stop himself, Mike blurts out, “Unless you want to hang out?”

Will freezes on the doorstep, and Mike thinks he’s put his foot in it. “Uh, yeah, sure,” Will says, sounding a little uncertain, but waves at the car, which promptly leaves. Joyce, Mike supposes; he wonders if she told Will about their encounter the other day.

“Mom, Will’s sticking around for a bit.”

“Oh, lovely!” she calls from the kitchen. “Will you stay for lunch?”

Will’s eyes widen, and Mike takes the hint. “Uh, no thanks, Mom,” he says hastily. “We’re, uh, gonna go somewhere.” Will shoots him a questioning look, and he mouths *I don’t know!*

“Well, have fun,” Karen says cheerfully, and this time they both wince. Mike pulls on his sneakers and peacoat, and they head out together.

They wander in silence for a little while before Will speaks. “Sorry if that was awkward,” he says. “I guess I forgot what it’s like to talk to people that don’t know about our situation.” He clears his throat. “So, do we have a destination, or..?”

“Um, not really,” Mike admits. “Didn’t exactly have time to plan anything for us to do.”

Will raises an eyebrow, and Mike just knows he’s thinking of the last time Will came to see him in Chicago. “Heard that one before.”

“Look, if you’re going to be snippy, I’m going home,” Mike says crossly, and Will holds up his gloved hands in surrender.

“I shouldn’t have said that. Sorry.” He sighs. “Just... weird day.”

“It’s not even noon.”

“Exactly.”

Mike chews his lip. “Want to talk about it?”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Mom and Hop got engaged.”

“Shit, for real?” Will nods, and Mike frowns, remembering something. “You told me they were engaged already.”

“Don’t get me started.”

Mike makes a mental note not to bring this up again. “Must feel weird.”

“Sure,” Will admits. “But I guess things won’t change that much, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they’re already living together,” Will says with a shrug. “And I know Mom already thinks of El as one of her kids, and I’m pretty sure Hop thinks the same of me and Jonathan.”

“You’re worried that getting married will make it harder if they break up?” Mike prompts, but to his surprise, Will’s face twists in confusion.

“What? No,” he says, eyeing Mike curiously. “That’s not it at all. What... why do you say that?”

“Because that’s what happens,” he says, in a voice that lets Will know

this is obvious.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Come on, be realistic. How many people do you know in happy long-term relationships?”

“Our siblings, for a start,” Will says. “They’ve been together, what, seven years now?”

“On and off,” Mike says. “And look at my parents. Or Dustin’s dad. Or yours, for that matter. Hell, while we’re on the topic, you can probably count us.”

“Okay,” says Will, clearly hurt and stumbling for words, “what about Lucas’ mom and dad? They’re still together, and they’re nothing like yours.”

Mike considers this. “Alright, then we’re at one. Out of how many others?”

“Mike, this is ridiculous,” Will says with a nervous laugh. “You’re not telling me you don’t ever want to get into a relationship with someone because you *might* end up unhappy?” Mike doesn’t answer, because although he’s never said the words aloud, Will’s sort of hit the nail on the head. As he considers this, he seems to see something *click* in Will’s mind, and his eyes widen slightly. “Oh. I see.”

“It’s just easier, isn’t it?” Mike shrugs, feeling very tired all of a sudden. Will offers only a non-committal hum, and they walk on, in contemplative silence. A few fresh flakes of snow tumble from the sky, and Will catches one in his palm, watching it melt into the wool.

“Well, Mom and Hop are fine,” he says stubbornly.

“I’m glad,” Mike replies, and he means it. He doesn’t want to be right, but he is.

“I daresay they’ll let us invite the Party, if you’re not too cynical for such ceremonies.”

Mike ignores the jibe. “Sure, if you want.” They walk a little further

until they reach the intersection leading to the town centre. “Did you want to grab a bite to eat, or..?”

Will shakes his head. “On a budget. Besides,” he says with a small smile, “everything’s closed, remember?”

“Then at least let me offer you a ride home,” Mike says, and Will smiles wryly.

“Since El’s stolen my bike, I think I’ll need one.”

They wander back towards Mike’s cul-de-sac, making occasional small talk, about classes and grades, societies and holiday shenanigans. Mike retrieves his keys from the house, and Will climbs into the passenger seat of the Wheelers’ ugly taupe family car, gifted to Mike for travelling to and from college when they bought a new one a couple of years ago. Despite its outward appearance, the inside remains relatively well-kept. It’s clean, and Mike still keeps an air-freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror. The old leather seats are worn and comfortable, and he sees Will stretching his legs out in the footwell, settling himself in as Mike turns the key a few times in the ignition, willing the ancient car into motion. The motor finally bursts into life with a violent shudder, and Mike backs them smoothly onto the road.

“Let’s hope your driving is better than your cycling.”

“Mm, eat glass,” Mike murmurs without thinking, and Will splutters with laughter, clearly unable to help himself. Mike smiles sheepishly at him, surprised at how much it affects him to realise that Will feels like his friend again.

This time, the intermittent silences between them feel companionable, rather than uncomfortable, and Mike breathes a sigh of relief: this is what he wanted from the moment he and Will called it quits. Not the silence specifically, but spending time together because they want to, and enjoying each other’s company without the added pressures of a romantic relationship. At least, he hopes Will’s enjoying his company too, and it’s a testament to their progress that

before Will gets out of the car, Mike feels confident enough to tap his arm and say, “Hey – are we good?”

Because Will’s using all of his concentration to suppress a fit of giggles over Mike’s *eat glass* remark, it makes him jump when he feels Mike’s hand on his arm as he’s getting out of the car.

“Hey – are we good?” The familiarity of the words hurts, but Will knows they mean something different now, and as such, he has a different answer.

“Yeah, we’re good.” He smiles at Mike, his heart only hurting a little, and jogs up the porch steps. The door opens before he gets there, and Joyce is standing there, looking stricken. Will immediately tenses. “What’s the matter?”

“Will, honey – I’m so sorry,” she says desperately, apparently about to cry. It’s at this point that he notices the laundry hamper on her hip – the one she keeps in the attic for him to use when he’s home.

“Oh, you *didn’t*!” he gasps, pushing past her and taking the stairs two at a time. Dashing up to the attic, he can see that his darkroom is still intact, but when he snatches one of the photos from the clothesline and squints at it in the dark, it definitely doesn’t look right.

“My mind was on wedding dates,” she says from behind him, her voice heavy with regret. “I completely forgot about all this.”

“Did you turn the light on?” he asks in a low voice, and her silence answers his question. Figuring it’s already too late anyway, he flicks the switch, and almost vomits at what he sees. “Fuck.” She doesn’t even rebuke him. Every single picture – nearly a hundred of them – is ruined. The colours are off, and the exposure is appalling, as if he left the camera’s shutter open for ten seconds at a time. Starting to shake, he lifts his hands to the back of his head, and exhales deeply and slowly, beyond livid. “*Fuck!*”

“Oh, god,” Joyce says in a small voice. “Will, I – ”

“Go away, please,” he says, his tone unnaturally high. He doesn’t

mean to be blunt with her, but it's only because he knows that if she stays, he's going to absolutely lose it, which she doesn't deserve. She doesn't argue, and he hears her footsteps on the stairs, fading away.

The second she's gone, Will reaches into the pocket of his body-warmer with trembling hands, and crosses to the window. He tears off the construction paper and throws open the window, no longer caring if Joyce finds out. He pulls off his gloves with his teeth, and he's still fumbling with the lighter ignition when a tentative knock on the wall of the stairway passage breaks the silence.

"What?" he snaps, but the replying voice isn't his mother's.

"I thought something was wrong." He doesn't need to look up; instead, he turns ninety degrees so his legs swing out of the window, and Mike joins him on the windowsill. "Here." He takes the lighter from Will's unsteady hands and obligingly lights up the cigarette between Will's lips. "I was thinking you'd quit."

Will bites back a threat to push him out of the window, and takes a long, comforting drag, holding his breath for a few seconds before exhaling a column of smoke into the open air. "First one since last year."

A single low chuckle escapes Mike's throat. "Impressive."

"Thanks." He exhales again, and leans sideways against the window frame. "Seriously, though. Emergencies only."

"No, I get it. This was a big project, I take it?"

"Thirty percent of my overall grade for this class," Will says gloomily. "Shockingly, I haven't actually started. This was the setup." Mike says nothing, evidently waiting for him to elaborate. "I'm playing with shadows to draw in charcoal. That's why I needed the craft shop, for some bigger paper."

"Do you still have the negatives?"

Will snorts. "When is life that easy?" He taps the cigarette, sprinkling

ash onto the roof tiles. "Threw them in the trash when I left. Stupid decision, really. But in my defence," he says, anger flaring in his voice again, "I shouldn't have needed them again."

"No," Mike says comfortingly. "What are you going to do?"

"They can give out reference photos," he says with a sigh, "but you get a lower grade if you don't use your own."

"That's bullshit."

"Oh, I know."

"Can you recreate them?"

"Technically, yes, but it'd be a lot of effort," Will says doubtfully. "I think El's sleeping over at Max's tonight, and even then I'd still have to get them developed. That's at least another two whole days before I can start actually drawing."

"Could I help?" Mike suggests, and Will glances over momentarily to see if he's joking, but shakes his head, breathing out another cloud of smoke.

"I can't ask you to do that. It'd be taking liberties."

"Will," Mike says seriously. "You're not asking. I'm *offering*."

He thinks it's the way Mike said his name that changes his mind. He actually hasn't heard him use it since they've been back, and he forgot how it sounds when Mike says *Will*; how he takes his time with it, savouring it, instead of rushing to the end like Will does when he's introducing himself. Added to the sincerity in his voice and the earnestness of his offer to help, Will finds himself moved, and he sort of wants to cry.

"You don't think it would be..." Will hesitates. "...weird? Me taking pictures of you?"

Mike shrugs. "I don't think it has to be. I mean, El did it, right?"

This, actually, is a fair point, although it still feels like a bit of a false equivalency. Even so, Will taps ash from the end of the cigarette and takes one final, quick drag with what's left, before throwing it out into the street. "Screw it," he says shortly, carefully avoiding getting tangled up with Mike as he drops back down from the windowsill. "Let's do it."

"Yeah?"

"Well, at this point, Mike," he says with a sigh as he starts pulling the spoilt photos off the clothesline, "I have quite literally nothing to lose."

Their first job is to reconstruct Will's light ring, so he and Mike scour the house for every light source they can find. Joyce helps, which Will appreciates, but doesn't acknowledge the olive branch. He'll reach a point where he's able to forgive her, but it's difficult at the moment, while he's still reaping the consequences of her mistake.

Mike brings down Will's camera and the stool that sits by the attic bed as a nightstand, while Will plugs extension cords into the various outlets around the room. Ignoring Mike's protestations, he pushes him into the bathroom with a pair of his black jeans and a black t-shirt belonging to Jonathan, and during the couple of minutes it takes Mike to change, Will inserts new film into the camera and makes them both coffee.

Mike emerges from the bathroom looking very self-conscious, and Will nods approvingly; he's not quite as well put-together as El was, but given the situation, he's not about to start complaining. He notices with some amusement that Mike's pulled up his socks (thankfully dark brown) to hide the two inches of ankle that would otherwise be visible.

"They're not quite long enough in the leg," Mike says doubtfully, picking at the denim.

"Wait, you're taller than me?" Will says in mock surprise, giving him the cup of coffee and a withering look. "Who knew?" He leads them back into the living room, and Mike steps gingerly through the mismatched array of lights, sipping his coffee as he sits down and wincing.

"Eesh," he mutters. "This is *very* sweet."

"I only put two in," Will says absently. As he switches on the right lamps for the first shots, he notices that the shadows of Mike's hair have a rather pleasing effect, and wonders why he asked El to put hers up (not that it really matters now).

"That explains it," Mike says with a cough. "I just take milk these days." He takes another sip, but his mouth twists into a grimace and he slides the cup under the stool with a shake of his head. "Sorry, I can't drink that."

"My fault," Will says, finally ready. "I should have checked. Hold still."

Conversation mostly goes quiet while Will concentrates, and mostly comprises quiet remarks such as *turn a little to your right*, or *don't fidget*, and eventually *for the love of God, Michael, stop fiddling with your hair, it's fine*. All things considered, El made a far more cooperative subject, but Will realises he's working with what's available to him.

After an hour, Will has about forty pictures, and doesn't think he can justify asking Mike to stay any longer. He switches off the lamps, and turns to Mike, who has apparently fallen into some kind of trance.

"You in there?" he asks, waving a hand, and Mike seems to come back down to earth.

"Sorry. Are we done?"

"Yeah, I think I have what I need." At this, Mike disappears to change back into his own clothes, and Will begins the long process of returning the room to rights, but pauses when Mike returns so he can

show him out. “Mike?” he says at the door, and he turns around. “I, uh...” He shuffles his feet and clears his throat. “Thank you. You know, for today.”

“It was no trouble,” Mike replies with a shrug. “I enjoyed it. I’m glad, you know, things are back to normal.”

This is, in Will’s opinion, a bit of a stretch, but he understands the sentiment, and responds in kind. “Me too.”

“See you,” Mike says with a slight smile, and Will raises a hand in farewell as he wanders back to his car, watching him drive away.

He closes the door in a state of some bemusement; those few hours with Mike were some of the nicest they’ve shared in a very long time, and judging Mike’s sentiment just before he left, he clearly agrees. What he can’t understand, therefore, is why he’s feeling so desolate. He sighs, and sets back to work dismantling the ring of lights so that the living room can be used again. He won’t be able to go into town to get the pictures developed until the morning, so he fully intends to try and relax this evening. After all, he has a lot of work to do tomorrow, and a lot to think about now.

He can’t get over what Mike said about relationships ending unhappily, and what he *didn’t* say when Will pointed out that this attitude suggested that he would never be with anyone. If he genuinely believes that, then... well, it’s worrying, to say the least, and essentially confirms that Mike really doesn’t want to get back together.

Will shakes this thought off – after all, he already knew this, and he doesn’t want to either. At least, he thinks he doesn’t, but he’s been wrong about a few things lately. Having resigned himself to an eternity of awkward conversations and frosty silences, spending time with Mike today felt quite a lot like it used to before they started dating.

He sighs as he sinks onto the couch, and switches the television on, neither knowing nor caring what he’s watching. Despite his mixed-up

emotions, he feels a little more content: part of the reason he avoided Mike for so long was because he was afraid that if things went back to normal, they'd end up having feeling for each other again, and the cycle would begin anew. But if Mike really doesn't feel that way anymore, and never wants to be in a relationship again with *anyone*... well, in Will's mind, that breaks the cycle, and it means they can be friends again. Incidentally, it also means he never has to worry about the possibility of Mike moving on with someone else.

Will blinks as his train of thought brakes at this particularly selfish station. *What?* That's not like him; he's not jealous, he never has been. Alright, it annoyed him when they were thirteen and Mike was constantly hung up on El, but that was different, because it annoyed everyone. Then it hurt when a girl in their math class asked Mike to the school's Sadie Hawkins dance in sophomore year, but that was different too, because... Will frowns; he's sure there's a reason. Because...

The television drones on, but Will hardly hears it. He can't imagine why he's so bothered by the thought of Mike meeting someone else, unlikely as it is. Their decision to split was mutual, and even now, Will knows it was the right call. They've established today that they're able to just be friends again, or at least they will be with a bit more time. He's over him now, so he should want Mike to be happy.

He *does* want Mike to be happy. With him.

A memory flashes across his mind, and Will finally remembers the dream he had last night; in his mind's eye, he sees Mike's lips press against his own as his friends cheer in the New Year around them. Now, he feels Mike's hand sitting comfortably in his own like a phantom limb, and pictures himself resting his head on Mike's shoulder, like they used to.

Will tugs his glasses off his face, tossing them wantonly onto the couch, and rubs his eyes in despair. He is so screwed.

4. The Box

Summary for the Chapter:

While going through some of his old things, Mike reaches a shattering epiphany.

Mike shifts uncomfortably on the lumpy mattress, and resists the urge to look at the clock again. After all, only two minutes have passed since he last checked the time, so it won't have changed much. He isn't usually an early riser, but today, for some reason, it's just gone five in the morning and he's wide awake. As he has been for the last hour.

He shoves a hand underneath his pillow in a vain attempt to plump it up a little, but it stays resolutely flat, so he rolls onto his back to alleviate the crick that's forming in his neck. He thinks briefly of Will: Louisville is an hour ahead of Chicago, so he'll probably be up by now. He's witnessed first-hand how little Will sleeps when he's at college. On the (increasingly rare) occasions that Mike would visit him, Will used to come to bed at least an hour, sometimes two, after him, and was nearly always awake again when Mike got up. If it weren't for the fact that Will was in bed with him if he got up to use the bathroom in the night, he'd have wondered if Will slept at all.

Out in the street, a car backfires loudly, and Mike practically falls out of bed, all thoughts of sleep forgotten. At least, he hopes it was a backfiring car. He can never be too sure, but there are no follow-up sounds, so he relaxes. He doesn't bother getting back into bed, instead pulling on a pair of socks and one of his more threadbare sweaters. A private room in one of the university's houses is a luxury he can afford, but keeping his little fan heater on throughout the night is not.

Only now does Mike remember that Will isn't at college yet: his term starts a week later than Mike's, so he's not going back until today. For some reason, Mike feels just a little more lonely with the knowledge that Will's at home, and he isn't. Stifling a yawn, he turns on the reading-lamp on his desk and skims through his literature analysis, trying to find some inspiration for his conclusion, which he

now has less than seven hours to write and turn in. He doesn't normally leave his assignments this late, but with everything going on back at home – and having to redraft the whole first page after scoring a line through it – he's a bit behind.

He scratches absently through a spelling error on the second page and rubs his eyes, struggling to focus his thoughts away from Will. After the incident with Will's photographs, they didn't get another chance to hang out by themselves, which is disappointing, because Mike feels as though they were just getting to a place where they were comfortable with each other's presence again. It did mean, however, that their final group meetup with the rest of the Party was much more like old times, and he's sure everyone else sensed it too. So, there are positives.

This doesn't explain, however, why Will has since been on his mind considerably more than the others, or why Will's laughter from the car-ride still echoes in his head. His eyes have gone out of focus, and the words blur on the page. Mike blinks rapidly a few times to make words take shape again, but he still can't really make much sense of them, which, considering he wrote them, is rather concerning.

Much of the novel's conflict is derived from the fact that Elizabeth has a tendency to make snap judgements and stick with them, whether or not they prove true. Consequently, her character and relationships only develop when she accepts that she isn't always right: a key example of this is...

"Oh, shut up," he mutters, averting his eyes quickly to the next page.

Although she still feels nothing for him and refuses his proposal, this moment indicates the novel's climax: it is from this point that her feelings towards Darcy begin to change as she realises that they've both changed in themselves.

Mike leans forward to rest his head on the desk and groans. These words were born of post-midnight inspiration and enough caffeine to paralyse a horse, so it's hardly surprising that he hardly recalls writing them; nonetheless they are *his* words, which makes the irony so much more infuriating.

He stands up from the desk, unwilling to read any further, and paces back and forth across the room, trying to order the muddled cluster of thoughts rattling around his mind.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, he thinks bitterly, *that I care about Will*. This much is obvious; it always has been. Mike has never admitted this to anyone, but this last year of his life has been the most miserable he can remember. The loss of Will's friendship pained him more than he can describe, and he's furious that they spent nearly an entire year not even on speaking terms, because he can't get that time back.

Truth number two, Mike thinks. *I don't want to screw things up again*. This, he thinks, is understandable: he only just got Will back, and he refuses to do anything to jeopardise that. He won't even consider it.

He's not really sure where he's going with this, but he decides to continue, even if for the sake of catharsis. *Truth number thr-*

His thought process is cut sharply off as he turns sharply around, and his foot collides with something hard and heavy at the foot of his bed. "Motherfucker!" he spits, biting his lip to hold back the shout of pain and rage forcing its way up his throat. He sinks onto the bed and rubs gingerly at his foot until he's sure nothing's broken. "What even was that?" he mutters angrily, and stoops down to pull it out.

A heavy wooden box slides across the bare boards of the room, and Mike's guard immediately goes up when he realises it's his memory box. He shoved it under the bed when he first moved in, and hasn't even thought about it since, let alone looked inside. Actually, he can't even pinpoint when he last opened it, so God only knows what he's about to find.

He lifts it onto the bed and tentatively lifts off the lid, stifling a coughing fit as he accidentally inhales a mouthful of dust. He sets the lid down on the floor and starts sifting through the jumble of trinkets and keepsakes he's collected over the years. A lot of them, Mike

realises with a pang, are souvenirs from things he's done with Will: movie ticket stubs from dates they've been on, drawings Will's made for him, and that stupid fluffy chicken Will won for him at a claw machine in an arcade in Louisville.

Mike draws in a sharp, shaky breath as he lifts the chicken out: underneath is a picture from their first summer together, when they'd been dating all of about two months. It seems like a lifetime ago.

Mike and Lucas had just passed their tests, so the six of them piled into two cars and drove north to Lake Michigan, with a couple of large tents in the trunk and no further plan. Once they were there, Max took charge and found them a nearby campsite where they could pitch, and so began the best vacation of Mike's life.

They had a glorious week, exploring the area, playing games on the sand, and hiking along the coastal paths (to Mike's chagrin). They spent their last night on the beach until the early hours of the morning. Mike and Will delighted in these occasions, as there were so few people around that they could be as open and playful and affectionate with each other as they wanted. In other words, they could act like any other seventeen-year-olds in love for the first time.

Leaving the others on the beach, they wandered a little way away from the group to a nearby stone quay stretching out onto the water, which led to a small lighthouse. They sat on the edge of the rocky wall, hand in hand, watching the sun sink below the horizon. A mist was rolling in like smoke, hovering perfectly over the surface of the water. The last of the sun's rays were scattered across the lake, and Will shuffled closer and rested his head on Mike's shoulder. Mike can still hear the wonder in Will's voice as he murmured the words *I love you* for the first time.

When Max later developed the photos from her disposable camera, she slipped one of them to Mike with a knowing smile. He turned it over curiously, and saw a stunning sunset shot of the lighthouse, with his and Will's merged silhouettes visible on the quay, contrasting starkly against the amber sky.

Now, Mike swallows the lump in his throat and wipes his eyes. He stares at the image, Will's joyful, whispered declaration of love still ringing in his ears.

How could I have been so stupid? he thinks desperately. Will was the best thing in his life. He *is* the best thing in his life, and Mike, so convinced by his dogmatic belief that love is doomed to fail, let him slip away, and watched in silence for months as their relationship began to splinter.

And now it's over. It's too late, and so it has been, in fact, for a day shy of a full year. Mike places the photo and the chicken carefully back into the box, and slides it back under the bed with a watery cough, before returning to his desk to conclude his assignment.

He spends the rest of the morning in a daze. Once the conclusion is finished, he doesn't bother proofreading his essay in full, because he doesn't exactly have a lot of time to make necessary alterations. After a brief shower, he stops at Starbucks for a pecan croissant, and drives to the campus, but all of this is pretty much muscle memory. His thoughts, unsurprisingly, are on Will, and he can't focus on anything else.

He takes in nothing during his morning class, which he knows he'll pay the price for later in the semester, but he can hardly bring himself to care. The second his professor dismisses him, Mike swings his backpack onto his shoulders and marches back to his dorm building, having resolved to forgo the rest of the day's classes.

Another advantage of having a private room is that it comes with a telephone mounted onto the wall. It's a perk he doesn't often take advantage of – not anymore, at least – but there's someone he needs to speak with before making any rash decisions.

He flicks through his address book until he finds the right number, praying that they'll have come home for lunch instead of eating at the office. "Come on, come on, come on," he mutters as the line

continues to ring.

Finally, there's a *clunk* at the other end. "Hello?"

"Hey, is that Jonathan? It's Mike."

"Mike?" Jonathan repeats, sounding surprised.

"Is Nancy there?"

"Yeah, we're just eating, we only have a half-hour. Could you – "

"I need to speak to her," Mike says quickly. "It's kind of urgent."

Jonathan sighs. "Hang on."

Mike hears him call his sister's name, and a few moments later, sounding rather like her mouth is full, Nancy says, "Mike? What's wrong?"

"I don't know what to do," he says, wishing he'd planned what he wants to say. "About Will."

"What about him?"

He closes his eyes and braces himself to admit a truth he hasn't spoken aloud in a very long time. "I still love him."

A long silence greets this pronouncement. "Okay," she says eventually, sounding a little bemused, "so... what's urgent?"

"Alright, it's not technically urgent," he admits, "but I just wanted to ask you – do you ever worry that you're going to end up like Mom and Dad?"

"No, of course not," she says with a gentle laugh.

"Why not?"

"Because they only got married because it was what you were 'supposed to do'," she replies. "They never really loved each other."

"What about people who do love each other at first?" he says

desperately.

Nancy considers this. "Love isn't a feeling," she says slowly. "Well, it is, but it's not just that. It's a choice, you know? You can choose to make it work, or you can choose to walk away. Jonathan and I fight sometimes, and it's not fun when it happens, but we love each other enough to work it out each time. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," he says in a small voice.

"The only advice I can give you," she goes on gently, "is to ask yourself if you love Will enough to work on your relationship, or whether it's best to leave that part of your life behind you." He doesn't really know what to say, but hums in acknowledgement. "Either way, you'll be fine," she says confidently.

"Thanks."

"Was there anything else?"

"Nope."

"Okay, well... let me know how it goes, yeah?"

"Will do." He hangs up, and doesn't realise until afterwards that he forgot to actually say goodbye. He sits on his bed for a few moments longer, picking at his thumbnail and bouncing his leg up and down. Then, without a word or change in his facial expression, he stands up, throws a few things into his backpack and marches out to the car.

As he stows his various art tools into his suitcase, Will reflects that really, he's glad to be leaving. He likes coming home to visit, but he's been under his family's feet for nearly three weeks, and it's definitely time to go. He's very much looking forward to having his own space again. Not a lot of space, admittedly, as the bedroom in his shared apartment in Louisville is little more than a broom cupboard, but at least it's his. Besides, he doesn't think his roommate is coming back for another week, so he'll have the place to himself for a little while.

Wedding planning has also begun in full force, which is another good reason to beat a hasty retreat. It's supposed to be a small ceremony,

and yet with all the talk of floral displays, caterers, officiants and everything else under the sun, the arrangements currently seems comparable to Lady Diana's wedding. Alright, this is an exaggeration, and Will knows he'll enjoy it when it happens, but even so, he's already heartily sick of hearing about it.

Oh, and there's the fact that he and Mike broke up a year ago today, which is a really depressing thought.

He's still packing the last of his things when El appears at the top of the stairs, making him jump.

"Would it kill you to knock?" he tuts.

"On what? There's no door."

"The wall, one of the steps, I don't care. Pick something and knock on it."

She sits down on the edge of the bed, looking wistful. She never says so, but she misses everyone when they go back to college. Her enrolment in the community college in the city made moving out pointless, so she's generally left alone during term times. He feels a pang of empathy for her, but doesn't say so. She'd only deny it anyway.

"What are you going to do about Mike?" she asks gently, and Will shrugs. When they were chatting the other night, he told her what he worked out over New Year, and she hasn't mentioned it again until now.

"Nothing, I suppose."

"You're not going to do *anything*?"

"El, he literally told me that he never wants to be in a relationship again," he says impatiently.

"He didn't mean that," she says.

"I'm telling you, those were his exact words." He lets out a humourless laugh. "Clearly I've already put him off the idea once." She doesn't have an answer to that, so she sits in silence, plucking at the duvet. "What classes are you taking this semester?" he asks, keen to change the subject.

"Not sure," she says, her mind still clearly elsewhere. "I don't sign up until the first week. I was thinking about world history."

Will hums in approval, privately observing that she's resorting back to simple sentence structures, a sure sign that she's upset. "Just be careful – world history courses are often just American history with a different label."

El wrinkles her nose in confusion. "Why?"

"Good question." He closes his suitcase and fumbles with the clasps until they *click* into place.

"Will!" Joyce shouts from downstairs. "You're going to be late!"

"Coming!" he calls back, loud enough to make El wince as she follows him out of the attic.

He's getting a cross-country bus back to college, but Joyce is driving him into Indianapolis to catch it, because unsurprisingly, it doesn't stop in Hawkins. Hopper said his farewells before heading off to work this morning, which leaves only El for him to say goodbye to. She walks with him as far as the porch, where he passes his suitcase to his mother to put in the car. He turns around to face El, who's looking moodily down at her shoes.

"Hey," he says gently, opening his arms, stepping back to steady himself as she throws her arms around his neck. "It's only a couple of months."

"I know," she says with a sniff when she steps away. "That's why I'm fine."

"Come see me during your reading week," he suggests, and El nods.

“Sure, maybe.” He hugs her again, then turns to go, but she catches his hand. “Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t lie to him,” she says quietly. “Friends don’t lie.”

He smiles at the familiar words. “I know. I won’t tell him – unless he asks.”

She nods her approval, and offers him a sad smile, before turning and going back inside.

“Is she okay?” Joyce asks when he joins her in the car and buckles his seatbelt, and he shrugs.

“Hard to say.”

She hums an affirmative and pulls out of the driveway, turning right onto the main road. The house and the little town quickly disappear into the horizon behind them as they crest a hill, and begin the descent towards the city.

The bus station is big, noisy and crowded, and Will hates it, but without a car of his own, it’s the easiest way of getting around, so it is, regrettably, a necessary evil.

“Okay,” Joyce says briskly, “I only have ten minutes in this spot before I get towed, so I can’t wait with you.”

“I’ll be fine,” Will says with a chuckle. “I’ve done this several times.”

“I know,” she says fondly, brushing a lock of hair behind his ear where it’s getting a bit long. “Get a haircut,” she adds, and he smiles.

“Will do.” He leans forward, and she presses a kiss to his cheek. He can see her eyes starting to mist over, and he takes his cue. “Love you,” he says, only just remembering to grab his suitcase from the trunk on his way past.

He waves as she pulls away, then starts the challenge of navigating the bus station. He scans the departure boards, frowning. Finally, his eyes light up: the 9:16 to Atlanta, calling at Louisville and Nashville – that’s it! He glances at his watch and gasps. Shit. He’s got less than five minutes to buy a ticket and get to the right bay. Mercifully, a ticket office window becomes available as he approaches, and he sprints to it before anyone else can step in.

“Where to, kid?” says a bored-looking man.

“Louisville, please.”

He glances up at the timetable pinned to his window. “Better hustle,” he says. “There’s a bus about to leave from Bay Three.”

Get on with it, then, Will thinks, irritated, but pulls out his wallet. “How much?”

“Sixteen dollars,” he says, and Will grimaces as he hands over the money. It’s definitely getting more expensive. He bounces impatiently on the balls of his feet, and dashes away the second the ticket’s in his hand, calling back his thanks as he runs.

“Bay Three,” he mutters, his eyes darting back and forth between the bright blue numbers. Six... five... four... three!

He makes a dash for it, dodging and weaving between the crowds of people boarding, alighting and changing buses. The door closes as Will approaches, and he waves his arms in a panic, shouting for the driver to stop, dignity be damned. He’s just about given up when the bus finally stops, and the doors hiss open again.

“Thank you,” he gasps to the driver, who holds out his hand. Will shows him the ticket, and the driver tilts his head backwards. The other passengers glare at him as he makes his way to the row of seats at the back of the bus, but he doesn’t much care. He’s just relieved that he’s made it.

Still recovering his breath, he reaches into his backpack for his Walkman and headphones, queued up with one of his own mixes from last year. He presses play, and the cassette whirs into motion,

filling his ears with the familiar drums and electric guitar of Belinda Carlisle's *Leave a Light On*. Will shifts in the uncomfortable seat and gazes out at the window at the city's high-rise buildings, a world removed from the small-town tranquillity of Hawkins.

Will isn't sure when he fell asleep, but he's suddenly awake, and the driver is calling out the Louisville stop. He pulls his headphones hastily down around his neck and slings his backpack onto his shoulder, apologising profusely to the woman in the seat in front of him as he smacks her around the head with it.

"Louisville, last call!" the driver shouts down the bus, and Will seizes his case as he jogs down the aisle, thanking the driver as he jumps down to the sidewalk. He takes a deep breath and smiles as he takes in his surroundings.

It's good to be back, he thinks contentedly, and starts the short walk back to his apartment with a spring in his step. He's just turned onto his street when he realises his music's still playing, and he reaches into the pocket of his body-warmer and pulls it out, fumbling with the buttons to shut it up. Finally, the song goes silent, and he pulls his backpack off and stows the music player inside.

He's so preoccupied, he doesn't notice the ugly taupe car parked on the curb until he almost walks into it. He moves to the left to avoid it, then stops and looks again. And then a second time. He walks round to the front of the car, and examines the licence plate.

"What the hell..?"

This is *Mike's* car. He's seen it countless times, so he's absolutely certain. Will looks around himself, and sure enough, Mike's halfway down the street, half-jogging towards him, holding what looks like a pre-prepared sandwich and a bottle of Gatorade. He hardly knows what to think, and as Mike slows to a stop in front of him, Will finds himself speechless.

"What... how..." He clears his throat and starts over. "How long have you been here?"

Mike glances at his watch. "About... twenty-one hours."

Will closes his eyes in despair. "You're an *idiot*, Mike Wheeler."

"I thought you were coming back yesterday," he says sheepishly, and Will shakes his head incredulously.

"You'd better come in." He leads Mike up the stairs to the second floor and unlocks the door to the apartment. "Chris?" he calls out, but there's no reply from his roommate. They're alone. Good. "So, um," he says, a little perplexed, "why are you here, exactly?"

"Okay," Mike says. His voice still sounds breathless, but Will suspects it's not from the stairs. "I've had a lot of time to plan what I'm about to say."

"Ominous," Will says before he can check himself.

"And I need you to listen," Mike says seriously.

"Sure, sorry."

Mike inhales deeply, and the next three words tumble out of his mouth in one rushed breath. "I love you." Will blinks twice in surprise. "I'm in love with you," he clarifies, more slowly. "I've known it since we were in ninth grade, and you passed your history test which you flunked the first time around, and I remember seeing how happy you were and only thinking that I always wanted to be the one to make you that happy." Will's glad Mike asked him not to speak, because he doesn't think he could if he wanted to. "You are... the best thing that has ever happened to me," Mike goes on, his voice wobbling minutely, "and I have no idea if you still feel the same, but I want you to know that for every minute of the last 365 days, I have regretted letting you go." He exhales heavily, and leans against the tiny kitchen table to support himself.

Will's still rooted to the spot, unable to move, or even think. "What... what changed?" he finally manages to say. "A week ago, you were never going to love again."

"I found a picture of us," he says, "from Lake Michigan, remember?"

“Okay, so what?”

“I realised I was wrong,” Mike says simply. “We’re nothing like my parents, Will, or your dad. They never had what he had, and I should have seen that, but I didn’t, and I...” He sighs deeply. “I should have done more to keep our relationship alive, instead of just watching it die.”

“So should I,” Will adds quietly.

“But I love you,” Mike says again, and the strength of his words makes Will’s heart skip over a beat. “Enough to try again, and enough to keep trying when things get rough.”

He stares down at the floor, and Will gazes at him for a moment. “Yeah.” Mike looks up, cautious hope dawning on his face. “Me too.”

“What...” Mike clears his throat. “What are you saying?”

Will wipes his eyes and groans lightly at having to spell it out for him. “I love you too, Mike,” he says with a shaky laugh, and Mike steps closer. “And I’m so sorry.”

Suddenly able to bear it no longer, he seizes Mike by the collar of his coat, leans up on his toes and kisses him fiercely. Mike reciprocates in earnest, a soft sigh escaping his lips as his hands run up Will’s sides, before moving instinctively to his jaw, cradling his head gently in his hands. Will runs a hand through the thick waves of Mike’s hair, marvelling at the ease with which they’ve fallen back into a rhythm he thought was forgotten forever. Overwhelmed with emotion and unable to control himself, he lets out a breath of laughter against Mike’s lips, who grins in response.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Will murmurs happily, using the pause to wrap Mike in a tight hug and bury his face in his neck. He doesn’t ever want to let go, but eventually he feels Mike fidgeting. “What’s the matter?” he asks, his voice muffled by Mike’s thick coat.

“I haven’t gone to the bathroom since yesterday afternoon,” Mike says in a small voice, and Will bursts out laughing as he lets him go.

As soon as he's out of sight, he bounces up and down on the balls of his feet, too elated to speak or think clearly. With an enormous effort, he forces himself to calm down, and to give himself something to do, he scoops some grounds into the ancient coffee machine on the kitchen counter. Mike returns while he's preparing cups, slipping his arms around Will's waist and hugging him from behind, leaning down to rest his head on Will's shoulder.

"Hi," Will says gently, and Mike places a gentle kiss on the side of his neck.

"Love you," he mumbles, making Will chuckle.

"Is this going to be a regular thing now?"

"Incessant," Mike says seriously. "If nothing else, we've got a whole year to make up for." Will turns around in his arms, and tilts his head slightly upwards again.

"You make a strong argument," he says with a smile, closing his eyes as Mike's lips press against his own.

"What changed *your* mind?" Mike asks a little while later. They're curled up together on Will's couch, and Mike's finally getting the opportunity to explore the feel of Will's new hairstyle. He claims it's accidental, but Mike doesn't see how it can have been accidental every time he's seen him. Either way, he's not complaining.

"I don't think I ever changed my mind," Will says after a moment. "But I guess what made me realise was you saying you were never going to be in another relationship."

That is absolutely not what Mike was expecting him to say. "Seriously? How do *those* events connect?"

"Okay, but before I tell you," Will says severely, "you have to promise not to judge me, because I do not come off well in this anecdote."

"Well, now you have to tell me."

“Basically, I realised,” he says, squirming under Mike’s arm, obviously mortified, “that I was pleased that you weren’t going to date anyone else, because, uh...” He clears his throat. “...it meant I wouldn’t have to watch you move on without me.” A smirk spreads across Mike’s face. “Shut *up*, I said you weren’t allowed to judge me.”

“Never took you for the jealous type,” Mike teases, and Will makes a half-turn and leans into Mike’s chest.

“Asshole,” he mumbles, and Mike kisses the top of his head. “Did you submit your assignment?”

“Yeah,” Mike replies, leaning his head back against the couch cushions. What with the drive, and having slept in his car, and the serious emotional rollercoaster he’s been on in the last twenty-four hours, he’s suddenly feeling incredibly tired. “I’ve missed, like, four classes since then, though.”

“You skipped classes to come here?” Will says severely, and slaps him lightly on the chest.

“I can leave, if you like,” Mike teases, but Will goes quiet. “What is it?”

“You will have to leave,” he says thoughtfully, “at some point. And we’re going to have to try and make this work long-distance again.”

“Hey,” Mike says, determined to reassure him. “We’ll do it right this time, I swear. I’ll come see you as often as I can.”

“Really?”

“Listen, I don’t have any classes on Fridays this semester,” Mike says, picturing his timetable in his mind’s eye. “And the drive down wasn’t actually that bad – I got here in less than three hours yesterday. I could be here by seven on Thursdays, and we’d have nearly three whole days together. Every week, if we wanted.”

Will nods, apparently comforted. “And I’ll call more often,” he says, stroking Mike’s chest absently with one hand.

“Me too.” Mike runs a hand through Will’s hair, and Will shifts his

position. “And obviously I’m telling my professors I had strep throat from today through to the end of the week.”

“Oh, obviously,” Will echoes softly, closing his eyes as Mike kisses him again.

He still can’t fully take in that he’s kissing Will again. Less than a day ago, he was utterly and genuinely convinced that this part of his life was over, and that he would be alone and miserable forever. Now, here he is – giddy with happiness, kissing his favourite person in the entire world with an urgency bordering on desperation. Mike realises that he’s sliding down the couch cushions, and Will lets him, breaking the kiss for just a second so that Mike can position himself more comfortably on his back, before bearing down on him again, emitting soft sighs of satisfaction against Mike’s lips.

The moment is broken as Mike’s stomach growls loudly, and he feels himself flush with embarrassment. It’s not exactly surprising, since he hasn’t eaten more than a granola bar since the croissant he bought on the way to class yesterday. Will’s clearly trying not to laugh, and Mike groans in annoyance.

“I’m sorry,” he says meekly, but Will’s already climbing off him. As Mike sits up, Will wanders over to the kitchen counter where Mike left his sandwich and brings it back to him, along with the energy drink.

“Here.”

Mike tears open the sandwich box, absolutely ravenous, and rolls his eyes as Will starts drinking his Gatorade. He forgot how much of a leech his boyfriend is. This prompts a realisation that they haven’t yet put a new label on... whatever this is, but he quickly decides that’s a conversation for another day. It’s enough that he’s here, and they’re together, and that he’s never going to lose Will again.

Unfortunately, Will has to spend much of the day working on his shadows project, which Mike resents on two counts. First, it eats up time which could, in his opinion, be much better spent, and second,

he has to watch Will spread out photos of him across his floor and wall so he can reference them, which makes him immensely self-conscious. He distracts himself with the ancient Atari Will's had since middle school, vaguely wishing he'd thought to bring some of his own school books and supplies so he could catch up on what he's missing. And they just... talk, for hours.

What worried Mike most when he was imagining their reunion was that they would find that they have nothing to say to each other. As it turns out, however, with the barriers between them toppled, they find they have a year's worth of conversation, anecdotes and inside jokes to catch up on, and the afternoon is littered with quips of 'oh, I've been wanting to tell you'.

Eventually, at about four, Will puts down his charcoal and stretches. "That'll do," he says, wiping his hands on the cloth on the desk.

"You're done?" Mike says hopefully.

"For now. I'll have to do some more tomorrow." Mike bounces up from the couch, making Will giggle as he pulls him back into his arms. "Needy, aren't we?" he remarks between kisses.

"Excuse you," Mike says, tapping him on the nose, "I have been incredibly restrained this afternoon."

"So have I," Will replies, feigning defensiveness. "I didn't expect to get any work done at all today."

"Joke's on you, I *didn't* get any work done today." Will's shoulders start to shake with poorly-suppressed mirth as Mike realises what he's said. "Wait." Will laughs aloud again, and Mike shuts him up in the only way he can think of.

"I missed you," Will says fondly when Mike pulls back for air, and he nods in agreement.

He didn't notice how much he's missed Will, but now that he has him back, he's fully aware how notably absent Will was from his life. Not even just as a boyfriend either, he realises, but as his best friend and

companion. Will has always been there beside him, through everything, and as stilted and uncomfortable as it was being in the peculiar half-friendship they endured over the holidays, Mike's willing to admit that it was a necessary trial, whether he realised it or not.

He needed to know that they could stand to be alone together, which was confirmed during their walk. He needed to see if they could actually enjoy each other's company again, which he realised on the subsequent ride back to Will's. He needed to prove that Will could still trust him, which he showed by taking Mike up on his offer to sit for the photoshoot. Most importantly, though, Mike needed to find out if Will still cared about him, which their conversation at the police station demonstrated, with the sentence Will left unfinished.

"I love you," he murmurs again, unwilling to hold the words back, and unable to believe any of this is real.

"Love you too," Will says softly, and for the first time in a very long time, Mike sees light shining in his hazel eyes. *Yeah*, he thinks happily, *this is real. We made it real.*

5. The Dance

Summary for the Chapter:

Three months later, Mike and Will return to Hawkins for Joyce and Hopper's wedding, and they embark on an adventure.

Notes for the Chapter:

Two updates in one day? Sure, why not. I mean I just wrote 32k words in four days, so who even cares at this point?

Hope you enjoy this final chapter - it's basically just fluff, if that's your thing.

The last morning in April dawns bright and warm, and Will reaches for Mike as he breaks through the fog of sleep. They've drifted apart a little during the night, and sensing that his boyfriend isn't yet awake, he simply shuffles a little closer until his chest brushes against Mike's back, and wraps an arm around him. Mike showered before coming to bed last night, and Will inhales deeply, breathing in the lingering aroma of coconut from his shampoo.

He closes his eyes and nestles into the crook of Mike's neck, allowing sleep to overtake him again for a little while, dozing on and off for the next half-hour or so, until Mike starts to stir. Will lifts his arm sleepily, so that Mike can turn over and kiss him on the nose.

"Morning," he mumbles, still barely awake, and Will hums in acknowledgement. "Today's the day."

Will's eyelids flutter open at this, and he looks blankly at Mike for a moment before it clicks. Of course – the wedding is this afternoon. "Oh, god," he groans, rolling onto his back and putting a hand over his eyes.

"I thought you were looking forward to it?" Mike turns onto his side and props himself up on one elbow, bemused.

"I'm glad they're getting married," Will corrects him. "That doesn't mean I have to enjoy the wedding itself."

"It won't be that bad," he says, rubbing soothing circles into Will's chest, and Will lets out a breath of derisive laughter.

"Okay, have you actually even been to a wedding?"

"Of course!"

"Since you realised you were queer?"

"Ah."

"Exactly," Will says. "It's so weird. I guarantee you that at least one old person will decide it's an appropriate time to ask when you're getting married."

"Yikes," Mike says, and Will hums an affirmative.

"Anyway," he says with a sharp exhale, apparently calming down a little, "enough of that."

He leans up expectantly, and Mike meets him halfway, sliding one hand inside Will's t-shirt and resting it on his waist. Will hums his approval, and Mike takes his cue, rising onto his knees and positioning himself over Will. He pulls back very slightly, relishing the way Will immediately follows him, propping himself up onto his elbows to avoid breaking contact. Mike grinds instinctively against him, and he feels Will grin against his lips, and his hands on his hips. Suddenly, with strength Mike forgot he has, Will flips him onto his back and pins his hands to the bed.

"Shit," Mike breathes, impressed, and Will smiles smugly, before bearing down on him again, sighing contentedly into Mike's mouth and prising his lips gently apart with his tongue.

He twists at the hem of Will's t-shirt, and Will breaks the kiss just long enough to tug it over his head and toss it on the floor. With his hands released, Mike cups Will's jaw as he kisses him again, inhaling sharply through his nose when he feels Will's groin brush his own, even through his boxer shorts. Sensing this, Will pulls back and tilts

his head questioningly, and Mike nods almost imperceptibly. He sits up a little, and his shirt joins Will's on the floor by the bed, their lips brushing gently with every given opportunity.

"Jon's making pancakes if you... oh, my god, Will!" Instinctively, Will hurls a pillow across the room with a snarl; it stops in mid-air for a few seconds, just above the railing, but El's already shielding her eyes and hurrying back down the stairs.

"What have I told you about *knocking*?" he yells after her, and Mike stares up at the ceiling, utterly mortified. "I'm so, so sorry," he says, reaching down to the floor for their t-shirts, as abashed as Mike.

"Don't worry," he says mildly. "Occupational hazard of sharing a room with no door."

"I can't believe her," Will fumes, rolling off Mike and slumping down onto the mattress. "She just has *no* sense of boundaries." Mike hums in acknowledgement, and Will sighs. "Of course we have to go down now, or she'll think we, uh, carried on."

"Oh, god," Mike groans, and glances over at Will. "Might be best to wait a few minutes, though," he says pointedly, and Will buries his face in his hands.

When they make their way down to the kitchen, El and Nancy are seated at the table, and Jonathan is at the stove. He's chatting with Nancy about the wedding pictures, and El's pushing half a pancake around her plate, staring blankly at the table. It occurs to Will that she has almost no awareness of such matters; he remembers that Joyce gave her 'the talk' when El got her first period, but as concerns relational intimacy, he's fairly certain the only person she's ever kissed is Mike, a fact he tries very hard to never think about. If she was ever really interested in him at all, she's never expressed interest in anyone since; it's very possible that she is now even more traumatised than before.

"For one of you," Jonathan says abruptly, flipping a pancake onto a plate and shunting it along the counter. Mike glances at Will, who

shakes his head, and takes it for himself.

He knows Jonathan well enough to know he's exceptionally observant; even if he doesn't know the exact details of what happened, he's probably put two and two together from Will and El's altercation, and the deeply uncomfortable silence in the room. As for his sister, she seems to be biting her lip, and he's certain that she's trying not to laugh.

Deciding it's easier to pretend nothing's happened at all, Mike spoons syrup onto his pancake, while Will starts the process of brewing fresh coffee. Jonathan finishes another pancake as he's pouring, and Will sets the two cups down on the table, pouring milk into Mike's, before moodily spreading hazelnut spread onto his pancake. El has the grace to look contrite, and Will offers her a reluctant, conciliatory half-smile. *It could have been worse*, he realises. *She could have come in a few minutes later*. All the same, he's still too embarrassed to be able to forgive her fully.

Ever the peacemaker, Jonathan strikes up a conversation about the day ahead, asking who they've invited to the wedding, since Joyce and Hopper allowed them each to bring a plus-one. The guest list for the evening reception is considerable, but the ceremony itself comprises only Joyce and Hopper, the three 'kids', and Will and Jonathan's maternal grandmother, who regularly voices her dislike of Hopper and El, and who clearly only insisted upon attending out of spite. Will has a strong suspicion that his parents (as he's started to think of them) realised that they weren't going to be able to stop Jonathan and Will from bringing Nancy and Mike respectively. This would leave El alone without a guest, and he thinks that's why they said they could all bring someone.

"Mike, obviously," Will says with a shrug.

"I'm bringing Max," El adds, which doesn't really surprise him.

He knows El has a few friends at college, but he also knows she doesn't like any of them anywhere near as much as the Party, of whom Max is her closest friend. He and Mike were a little worried

that Dustin and Lucas would feel left out, so he asked them last week if they were okay with not being invited.

“Are you kidding?” Dustin exclaimed. “We’re coming to the interesting bit in the evening, right?”

“Sure.”

“Then I’m pretty sure we got the best deal,” Lucas added, and they bumped fists, relieving Will’s concerns.

Now, El starts telling Mike about the venue for the reception, and Will smiles gratefully at Jonathan as the tension in the room starts to dissipate.

“What time do we need to be there?” Nancy asks, bringing his attention back to the room.

“One-thirty,” Jonathan says. “Give or take. Mom and Hop are arriving just before two.”

“Where are they, anyway?” Mike asks, sipping his coffee.

“They booked a hotel room for last night and tonight,” Will says pointedly, and Mike winces.

“Stop it,” says Nancy disapprovingly. “They’re getting married, for goodness’ sake.”

“I’m not judging them,” Mike says, raising his hands in surrender, and once again, Jonathan swiftly moves the conversation on before El can ask any uncomfortable questions.

When breakfast is done, four out of the five of them need showers, and to his annoyance, Will gets there last. He washes himself as quickly as possible in the rapidly-cooling water, wishing he’d had the common sense to shower last night, like Mike did. When he gets out, he stands in front of the mirror with his hair gel and sighs.

Before they left yesterday, his mother quietly remarked that for his own sake, it might be wise to adopt a slightly more traditional look, and he didn't need to ask why. With this in mind, Will combs his hair neatly to the side; this is, actually, how it was supposed to look when he first had it cut this way, but the first time he tried it, he messed it up, accidentally accentuating the curls which naturally form at the front (his mother's genetics, he thinks). He quickly decided that he liked it this way, and kept doing it.

Now, though, he stares at his reflection and is bizarrely reminded of his appearance throughout high school, after he abandoned his ridiculous signature bowl cut. "Just for today," he mutters and exits the bathroom in his towel.

Mike's already dressed, and has helpfully laid Will's suit out on the bed, ready for him. "You clean up well," Will says, looking him up and down as he unwraps his towel and starts getting dressed.

Mike shrugs modestly, a vision in navy blue and white. "I didn't know you were wearing grey." Will knows what he means – at their high school prom, they deliberately wore complementary colours, so they could go together whilst still staying under the radar.

"Trust me," Will replies wryly, "it was not my choice."

Hopper very generously took him and Jonathan to a tailor in the city to buy them both a new suit, to Jonathan's protestations. Upon discovering it was for a wedding, the tailor practically twisted Hopper's arm until he chose grey, stating firmly that black was funereal, navy was too casual and anything else was either dated or too modern. In Will's opinion, navy would have been a far more suitable choice, but on top of the tailor's forceful recommendations, Jonathan was being deliberately obstinate and would only agree to grey.

"I think it suits you," Mike says sincerely, and Will gives him a withering look.

"Mike, I could wear nothing but a *sack* and you'd say it suited me." Mike grins, and threads Will's tie around his collar. "But thank you anyway. It's okay, I got this."

Mike only discovered recently that Will had never worn a real tie in his life, having only ever used clip-ons for previous family weddings and funerals. This revelation came out one morning a few weekends ago, when he was visiting Will and he woke up to find him in the bathroom, nearly in tears. A step-by-step guide, cut from an encyclopaedia, was taped to the mirror, and he had practically twisted himself in knots. Mike then spent the next two hours in the bathroom with him, guiding him through the motions, to the bemusement of Will's roommate, until he could do it himself without any hints.

Now, Mike listens to him whispering the steps to himself, watching him surreptitiously over the pages of the book he's pretending to read, knowing he doesn't like to be watched. He starts over a couple of times with a few growls of exasperation, and Mike considers offering help, but decides against it. *He'll get there*, he thinks.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Will exclaims, "Did it!" with such pride that Mike can't help smiling.

He crosses the room to where Will's standing, and examines him. "Not bad," he says sincerely. "May I..?" Will nods, and he makes a few tweaks where the knot is a little too tight, pulling gently on the silky material until it sits a little more comfortably around his neck. "Perfect." Will grins, and Mike tilts his head down to kiss him. With the tie vanquished, Will shrugs on his vest, and Mike holds the jacket open so Will can slide his arms easily into it.

"Thoughts?" he says bashfully as he fastens a button, and Mike appraises him with interest.

"So, do you have a date to this wedding, or..?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Will says, playing along. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Damn," Mike says with feeling, reaching for Will's hands and threading their fingers together. "What's he like?"

"Kind of moody sometimes," Will admits, trying to maintain his composure as Mike lifts their hands to poke him sharply in the side.

“But he’s nice when you get to know him.”

“Mm, I bet he’s handsome.”

“Positively average,” Will murmurs as Mike lowers his lips towards his.

“Okay, fuck you,” Mike says, bursting out laughing and pulling away.

“Tempting, but if you expect me to do this – ” he points to his tie with a smirk, “ – all over again, you’ve got another think coming.” He grabs Mike’s hand again and tugs him back towards him, pressing his lips against Mike’s and cradling the back of his head with his free hand. Someone – El, Will thinks – yells their names from somewhere downstairs, and Will pecks Mike’s lips once more and smiles at his boyfriend. “Come on, or they’ll leave without us.”

“I thought we were taking my car?”

“Hm, then I guess we have more time.” He crosses the room and leans over the railing to call down the stairs. “We’ll meet you there!”

El shouts back a muffled response, but Mike’s already joined him at the stairwell, kissing him urgently, desperately, still craving his touch; still feeling like they’re making up for lost time, even nearly four months on.

Mike’s pretty sure they’re out of their (second) honeymoon phase now; past the point of tiptoeing around each other and the newness of the relationship, but it’s difficult to tell, because he still feels so absurdly happy, and he thinks it’s because they’re doing it so much *better* this time around. When Mike visits, he comes with ideas of things for them to do, rather than leaving all the planning to Will. He obviously doesn’t know the city as well as Will, but he’s familiar enough with it now to know what options there are, which has taken some of the strain off Will, who always has to host him because travelling to Chicago is considerably more difficult.

Will, for his part, has made an effort to tell Mike when he’s frustrated or down, for whatever reason, rather than keeping it bottled up.

Every so often, he surprises Mike by sending a postcard in the mail to arrive between visits. On Will's birthday, Mike showed up out of the blue with a meal he'd prepared beforehand, a bottle of wine, and video rentals of Will's favourite movies for him to choose from.

Neither of them can think of a time when they've been happier, and this privately crosses both their minds as they wander out to Mike's trusty old car.

"Ready?" Mike says, and Will nods, pulling a stick of gum out of the packet in his pocket. He tilts the pack towards Mike, who shakes his head.

"Ready for a long afternoon of pretending to be straight," Will says wryly. "Sometimes I think we spend too much time around people who don't care. It's desensitised us." Mike hums in agreement.

"We'll have to be careful," he says with a chuckle.

"I'm sure the others will keep us distracted."

"We'll go to opposite sides of the room. You take El and Max, I'll take Lucas and Dustin."

"Absolutely not. I live with El, it's your turn." This makes Mike laugh out loud, and Will thinks it might be his favourite sound in the universe.

Jonathan and Nancy's car isn't in the parking lot when they arrive at the town hall, so they park up and wander in together. The lady at the entry desk looks sceptically at them as they approach.

"Can I help you?"

"We're here for the Byers-Hopper wedding," Will says, inexplicably nervous.

She glances at her computer monitor, which Mike is examining with interest. "What's its CPU speed?" he asks eagerly, and Will nudges him at the sight of the expression she's giving them.

“Name?” She addresses Will, ignoring Mike.

“William Byers. My brother Jonathan’s on his way with some more guests.” She nods her approval and points down the hall.

“First left, sixth door on your right. One of your party has already arrived.”

Mike adopts a puzzled expression, and Will’s heart sinks as he realises he forgot to tell him about his grandmother, and quickly explains. “Brace yourself,” he hisses as he pushes the door open.

“William,” says a sharp voice. A tiny woman, even shorter than Joyce, approaches them, sporting an alarming lime-green skirt suit with a matching hat, which adds several inches to her height.

“Hi, Gramma,” Will says feebly. “How are you?”

“What?”

“I said, ‘how are you?’” Will repeats, a little louder.

“Rheumatism’s the worst it’s ever been,” she says by way of a response, and he leans down obediently to kiss her on the cheek. She presses a quarter into his hand, and he gives Mike a deliberate look. “Who’s this?”

“This is my best friend, Mike,” Will says, and Mike inclines his head politely.

“I didn’t realise your mother was permitting just anyone to attend. I’d have invited my taxi driver.” Mike is starting to understand what Will meant.

“Mom said Jonathan, El and I could each bring one guest, Gramma.”

She snorts. “I see. Where is your brother?”

“Running away, if he knows what’s good for him,” Will mutters, and Mike suppresses a smirk.

“What?”

"He's on his way, they had to go and pick up El's guest." She doesn't acknowledge this, but permits Will to lead her to her seat, before positioning himself and Mike a few seats down, already fed up with her company. If she notices that they're deliberately not sitting with her, she doesn't comment, but she watches them out of the corner of her eye. It's most unnerving.

"I can see why you don't talk about her," Mike whispers.

"Oh, she's just getting started," he mutters in reply, with a low laugh. "Wait 'til the others get here."

They don't have to wait long, and Mike quickly sees what he was talking about. She marches to the door and greets Jonathan and Nancy as she greeted Will, but rather than enquiring about Max as she did with Mike, she ignores El completely. El hangs back a moment, but seems to have expected this. Presently, she tugs Max away and sits down next to Will in a huff.

"What the hell was that?" Max hisses, incensed on El's behalf, and Mike is inclined to agree.

"Told you," Will says darkly. "She doesn't approve of Hop, and El by extension."

"So when are you two tying the knot?" his grandmother says loudly, and Nancy chuckles uncomfortably.

"Not yet, Gramma," Jonathan says through gritted teeth.

Once again, she returns to the minimal lines of seats, but this time, she sits a few rows back. Will isn't sure, but he thinks she's distancing herself from El, who's staring stonily at the registry table at the front of the room. Quite spontaneously, the registrar's fountain pen rolls off the table and clatters onto the stone floor, and as El dabs at her nose with her handkerchief, Will reaches over and squeezes her free hand.

"Gramma's on fine form," Jonathan mutters as he and Nancy join them at the front. "Sorry, El."

"I'm fine," El says shortly, as the officiant's water jug shatters.

When the mess is cleared up, the officiant steps up to the faux-marble podium at the front of the room and clears his throat. "Would you please stand." As the doors open, Will takes a chance and links his little finger around Mike's, figuring that no one is going to be paying them any attention.

From a gramophone by the registry table, the strains of *Canon in D* fill the room, and Will smiles as Joyce and Hopper enter. His mother, who's never enjoyed wearing dresses, is wearing a sleek white pant suit with a black blouse, the perfect inversion of Hopper's black tuxedo and white dress shirt. They offer Joyce's mother a polite nod, and smile warmly at the kids as they reach the front, and the gramophone fades to silence.

Despite the pandemonium that has made up the last few days and months of planning, the ceremony, in Will's opinion, is simple, sweet and modest. Throughout the proceedings, he's struck by how highly appropriate this seems, considering the uncomplicated, unselfish natures of both Hopper and his mother, and despite his prior cynicism, when Mike nudges him and offers him a secret smile, he can't help but reciprocate it.

"...they have demonstrated their commitment to each other through the giving and receiving of rings," the officiant is saying, "and given the lack of legal or moral impediment to their union, it is my privilege to announce that they are now husband and wife together." He turns to Hopper and smiles. "You may now kiss the bride."

Hopper grins, and eagerly obliges, as the entire front row jump to their feet, applauding and cheering enthusiastically. Joyce and Hopper break apart with a silent chuckle at their kids' ardour, and they all rush forward to give them both a hug. When they go to leave, Will and El walk ahead of them, scattering the confetti they smuggled in. Once the wedding car (actually Hopper's police truck, to keep costs down) has disappeared around the corner, they return to their cars, free to enjoy the rest of the afternoon until the evening reception.

When Mike, Will, El and Max arrive at the community hall a few hours later, which Joyce and Hopper have hired for the evening, Jonathan and Nancy are already there, making last-minute adjustments to the venue with Steve Harrington and a couple of their other old friends from high school.

“Not bad,” El says, looking around.

Will lets out a hum of dissent. “Where’s the charm?” he asks, and he and El crack up, to Max’s confusion.

As the girls wander off to the bathroom, Mike takes in the scene, and is inclined to disagree with Will’s sentiment – he thinks it’s been done up reasonably well: string lights have been hung between the ceiling beams, and a dozen or so tables have been set up by the pop-up bar, leaving ample space for dancing.

Everyone in Hawkins knows Hopper, of course, and most people know Joyce, so they’re all aware that half the town will probably turn up at some point, on the clear understanding that Joyce and Hopper are not paying the bar tab, and that anyone who causes trouble will sit in a cell until Hopper returns from his honeymoon.

“You okay?” Mike asks quietly, knowing Will hates this kind of situation. He’s not a fan himself, but he also knows Will’s most inclined to smoke when he’s anxious, which he hasn’t done for nearly two months now, and Mike’s keen for him not to break his streak.

“For the moment,” he says, reaching surreptitiously for Mike’s hand. Mike opens his mouth to speak again, but he’s interrupted by an explosion of noise as Dustin arrives with Lucas, and sees Steve across the hall. Mike and Will watch in amusement as the two reunite with an excitable yell and one of their many secret handshakes.

“Do you ever feel like he’s outgrown us?” Lucas asks drily, appearing at Mike’s shoulder and making them both chuckle. Ironically, Max and El return from the bathroom at that moment, and Lucas’ attention is immediately diverted.

“Do you ever feel like he’s outgrown us?” Mike asks under his breath, and Will snorts with laughter.

“Gross,” El remarks, joining them at Will’s side and wrinkling her nose at Max and Lucas.

“Tell me about it,” says Will.

“You can talk,” she replies, and Mike feels his ears heat up.

“I will literally pay you,” Will says through gritted teeth, “to *never* mention that again.” She grins wickedly and bounces off to find Jonathan. “I hate her,” he mutters, and Mike chuckles.

“No, you don’t.”

“Oh, right now, I do,” he says tartly.

“Yeah, but now she’s *legally* your sister,” he points out, and Will falls silent.

“That’s it, I’ve had enough. We’re finished.” He starts walking away, and Mike catches up, still laughing.

An hour and a half later, the venue’s packed, filled with both Hopper and Joyce’s friends, and random townspeople wanting to congratulate them. Mike and Will, both profoundly overwhelmed by the assembled crowds, have been stuck together like glue since the event started. Thankfully, though, the people who know them well enough to notice just know that this is what they’re like. Will’s shed his jacket and tie, leaving him in just his shirt and vest, and he’s rolled his sleeves up to his elbows; in Mike’s opinion, he’s never been cuter.

At one point when a raucous cheer goes up from the police force’s staff table, Will flinches and instinctively leans against Mike, who has a flash of *déjà-vu*, recalling a long-forgotten memory from when they were children.

Having finished kindergarten together, they entered first grade at the same time. Because they now stayed the whole day through, there

were twice as many kids, and when Will discovered this information, he was petrified. On their first day, Mike arrived first, and he point-blank refused to go in, insisting to his mother that he had to wait for Will to arrive before he could go in. When Joyce finally arrived at the school gate with Will in tow, Mike grabbed his hand, and they went inside together. As the door closed behind them, Will took one look at the crowded classroom and leaned against Mike until his shoulder pressed into his chest. "It's okay," Mike said. "They'll like you."

"It's okay," he says now. "They'll have their first dance soon, then we can leave when we like."

"Sounds good," Will says, relieved.

"Do you want something to drink?" Mike asks gently, and Will shakes his head, so Mike wanders over to the bar alone. The bartender looks suspiciously at him, until he hands over a dollar and asks for a Pepsi.

He sips it as he returns to where he left Will, but he's disappeared. An instinctive, deep-seated panic sets in, but he forces himself to shake his head. *Don't be stupid*, he thinks, *he's probably just gone to the bathroom*. He waits a few minutes, but Will doesn't return, so Mike tugs El's sleeve as she runs from the dance floor with Max, laughing.

"What's up?" she says, still giggling.

"Have either of you seen Will?"

She shakes her head. "No, sorry."

"Wasn't he with you?" Max asks, her voice matching his concern.

This, more than anything, sets off the alarms in his mind, set so long ago, and Mike passes El his Pepsi can with a word of excuse and jogs towards the open fire door behind the stage. He pokes his head out through the gap, and catches sight of a glowing orange flame in the darkness.

"Will, is that you?"

“Yeah,” he says without turning around. He’s perched on a low wall behind the building, and he taps ash onto the flagstones. “Sorry. Had to.”

“It’s alright,” Mike says, immensely relieved, forcing his heartrate to return to a more normal level. “You should have told me where you’d gone, though. I was starting to worry.”

“Oh, Mike, I didn’t even think,” Will says apologetically, and this time he does look up as Mike joins him on the wall. “I’m so sorry, that was... tactless.” Mike shrugs and glances around before slipping an arm around Will’s waist. “Are you mad?” he asks quietly. “About this?”

“No,” he sighs. “I knew tonight would be tough for you.” He pauses. “This... *is* the first time, right?”

“Oh, god, yeah,” Will says hastily. He pulls the pack from his pocket and shows it to him. “Same one from New Year, see?”

Technically Mike can’t prove this, but he trusts him, so he lets it drop. “Then no, I’m not mad. As long as you don’t smell of smoke next time you try and kiss me.” Will drops what’s left onto the ground and crushes it under the heel of his shoe. “Did it help?”

“A bit.” Will shuffles closer to Mike and rests his head on his shoulder. “This helps more, though.”

“Was it just the noise and stuff?”

“That,” he sighs, “and also the sheer irony of your mom asking if I’ve found a girlfriend at college.”

Mike chuckles, but it quickly turns into a grimace. “Yikes, sorry about that.”

“Just out of interest,” Will says absently after a moment, “do you think you’ll ever tell them?”

“Oh, I expect so,” Mike says, his voice turning gloomy, “but not while they’re still paying for me to go to college.”

Will lets out a silent breath of laughter, and pulls his chewing gum out of his other pocket. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"It's not like I care what they think," Mike says, pulling a stick from the packet when Will offers it to him.

"No, it's okay, I get it. Really."

They're quiet for a few moments, then they hear a voice over the loudspeaker. "*Ladies and gentlemen, kindly vacate the dance floor for the couple's first official dance.*"

"Come on," Will says, standing up and holding out his hand to help Mike up. "El will never forgive me if we miss this."

They make their way through the crowd, until they're at the front of the circle surrounding the dance floor. Elvis' *It's Now or Never* starts playing over the speakers, and the crowd applaud as Joyce and Hopper circle the floor in an inexperienced mix of various ballroom dances, laughing as they trip over each other's feet. At the end of the first chorus, Hopper dips Joyce down and kisses her, and a chorus of cheers and whistles erupts around them.

When Hopper brings her back onto her feet, Joyce, still beaming, beckons everyone onto the floor, and Will and Mike take their cue. Mike slips through the crowd, but a blur of periwinkle blue catches Will's hand and pulls him into the centre of the dancers. He protests loudly, but El just beams and takes both his hands in hers.

"Don't make me do this," he pleads, but she shakes her head.

"You're my brother now," she says, as if that's the end of it.

"So what, I have to do what you tell me?"

"No, but obviously we have to dance at our parents' wedding," she replies cheerfully. The song changes, slipping smoothly into the upbeat section of Tina Turner's *Proud Mary*, and Will resigns himself to his fate, following El's lead, twisting with her and spinning her around when she lets go of one hand, humouring her.

At one point, he catches Mike's eye across the room, who's leaning against a wall with his arms folded, grinning like the Cheshire cat, obviously highly amused by this turn of events. Will shoots him a look that clearly says *not a single word*, before turning his attention back to El.

After what seems like hours, the song changes again, and El and Will slow down as Foreigner's *I Want to Know What Love is* starts playing. She takes his hands, quite content just to sway back and forth after expending so much energy. "I'm glad you and Mike are okay," she says, in a voice meant only for him, her dark eyes bright with sincerity. "You seem so much happier."

He nods and smiles at her. "Thanks. That... means a lot, actually."

Finally, she lets go of his hands, and dismisses him with a tilt of her head. "Go on, I know you want to go home."

"Have fun," he calls as she pulls Jonathan onto the dance floor, ignoring his protests. Will shakes his head fondly, and smiles up at Mike as he reappears at his side. "Sorry about that," he says with a chuckle.

"Nah, it was adorable. You're like Luke and Leia."

Will snorts. "Who does that make you – Han?"

"Only if you're Leia."

"Oh, shut up," he says, but he's laughing, and there's no malice in his words. "That's a compliment, actually."

"And I meant it as one," Mike says with a grin. "Oh, yeah, I found your jacket." He hands it over, and Will pulls it on, tucking the burgundy tie further into his pocket.

"Thanks. Can we... go, then?"

"I think so," he says. "No one's counting on us for a lift home. We ought to tell your mom and Hopper we're leaving, though."

As it happens, they're already at the door, saying goodbye to people

as they leave and thanking them for coming. Joyce beams when she sees them coming, and pulls them both into a tight hug. Hopper hugs Will too, and approvingly holds out a hand for Mike to shake.

“Have a great time,” Will says. “I’ll see you in June.”

“We’ll call you once we’re back,” Joyce says, hugging him again, and patting Mike affectionately on the cheek. “Be good to him,” she says severely, and he chuckles.

“On my life.”

With these words, he follows Will out, reaching for his hand once they reach the darkened parking lot. The locks blink as Mike presses his key fob, and Will turns to Mike with a curious expression, leaning on the roof of the car.

Mike narrows his eyes. “What are you up to?”

“I was just thinking,” Will says, “what if we didn’t go straight home?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“What if we went up to the lake?” Will says; Mike knows this tone, although he admittedly doesn’t hear it this often. It’s the voice Will reserves for when he’s suggesting doing something a little bit adventurous, or else mischievous.

“I thought you hated the quarry.”

“Not the *quarry*,” Will says, rolling his eyes. “The big lakes.”

“Will, that’s like a four-hour drive at least,” Mike says in disbelief. “It’d be the middle of the night before we got there!”

“Okay,” says Will in the same excited tone. “And?” This is a surprisingly strong argument, and Mike throws caution to the wind.

“Sure,” he says, laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation. “What the hell.” Although the same joy is still sparkling in his eyes, Will lets

out a sigh as he sinks into the passenger seat. “You okay?” Mike asks as he steers them out onto the road.

“Yeah, just... worn out.”

“I’m not surprised – I’ve never seen you dance before.”

“You have,” Will exclaims. “I danced at prom.”

“That was *Rock the Boat*, it hardly counts.”

“Hey, it still counts if they tell you what to do. Those are the best kind of dances.”

“That absolutely doesn’t count.”

“It’s still more than you did.”

Their playful banter continues all the way to the highway, from which point they chat intermittently. Will knows Mike likes to concentrate when he’s driving, but he also realises he’s responsible for keeping him awake. With this in a mind, they stop at an Arby’s after a couple of hours, which perks him up considerably.

It’s well past 3:00am when they pull off the road onto a grassy knoll overlooking Lake Michigan. Will grabs his battery radio from the backseat as they get out and slide down the sandy slope onto the beach, deserted for at least half a mile in both directions. It’s a clear night, and the moon, just starting to wane, illuminates the beach as a cool night breeze whips around the collar of Mike’s shirt.

“We’re not exactly dressed for the beach,” Mike remarks, as Will laces their fingers together.

“You know what I realised?” Will says, and Mike tilts his head, indicating that he should go on. “We’ve never danced together.”

Mike frowns, casting his mind back. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure,” Will nods. “We couldn’t dance at prom, for obvious

reasons.” He holds up his little radio and smiles.

“Will Byers,” Mike says slowly, “did you make me drive for five hours just so we could dance?” Will nods happily, and starts turning the radio dial, twiddling the tuner until he finds one of the late night stations. He cranks the volume up to the maximum and sets it down on the sand, before standing up and walking towards Mike.

Mike closes the distance between them, and Will places one of his hands on Mike’s waist, threading their fingers together with other. Mike doesn’t really know how to dance, so he lets Will guide them, making slow, gentle turns with the tinny music emanating from the radio. Mike dips his head down, and Will tilts his head to side as their lips meet, as comforting and familiar as coming home, but always as exhilarating as the first time.

When they pull apart, Will rests his head against Mike’s shoulder, relishing of the feel of him in his arms, unable to believe how lucky he is. *And to think*, he muses, *I could have lost this forever*.

“I love you,” he murmurs, and he closes his eyes, smiling peacefully when he hears Mike echo the words back to him.

When they tire of dancing, Mike fetches a blanket from the car and smooths it out on the sand. They settle down together, watching the darkness of the night start to fade into a milky twilight. Mike can feel his eyelids drooping shut with exhaustion, but suddenly Will nudges him awake, as the first rays of the morning sun creep over the cliffs to the east.

“Good morning,” Will says softly, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to his lips.

“Morning,” Mike smiles, brushing a strand of hair from Will’s eyes where the gel is losing its grip.

The daylight grows stronger, warming their faces, and wordlessly, they stand up and gather their things. They can’t stay, at least not like this: early-morning joggers and dog-walkers will arrive soon, and

not all of them will approve. The gravity of their situation hangs in the air between them, unspoken, and they don't complain. They know the risk, but they also know their bond is stronger because of it.

With a smile of deep, true contentment, Will tucks the radio and the blanket under his arm, and holds out his hand for Mike to take. They turn back to the car, blinking in the early morning sunlight.

Behind them, unobserved, like smoke hovering over the water, a mist rolls in across the lake.

Author's Note:

If you've enjoyed this, please do leave a comment with your thoughts. It doesn't have to be long or eloquent! Alternatively, you can find me on Tumblr at @tea-for-one-please ☐